EARLSCOURT

Alex. Allardyce

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EARLSCOURT

EARLSCOURT

A NOVEL OF PROVINCIAL LIFE

BY

ALEXANDER ALLARDYCE

AUTHOR OF
'BALMORAL: A ROMANCE OF THE QUEEN'S COUNTRY,'
'THE CITY OF SUNSHINE,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

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CONTENTS OF THE THIRD VOLUME.

CHAP. PAGE

XXXIII. THE COLONEL'S COUNSEL, ... 1

XXXIV. A FAMILY MATTER, ... 19

XXXV. A TANGLED WEB, ... 36

XXXVI. DIPLOMACY, ... 51

XXXVII. BREAKING GROUND, ... 74

XXXVIII. A PROPOSAL, ... 86

XXXIX. A CRISIS, ... 109

XL. PLAYING WITH FIRE, ... 127

XLI. THE ELOPEMENT, ... 147

XLII. *RUIT CŒLUM*, ... 171

XLIII. THE RIVALS, ... 190

XLIV. DOROTHY'S DISGUISE, ... 211

XLV. THE TWO VOICES, ... 229

XLVI. DOROTHY, ... 250

XLVII. TWO YEARS AFTER, ... 272

EARLSCOURT.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE COLONEL'S COUNSEL.

It was certainly in no careless mood, despite his easy and indifferent air, that George Colpoys found himself entering Earlsport. He was quite aware that the step which he had taken must eventually lead to a breach with his brother; and that Lord Earlsfield was not a man who would be influenced by any sentimental feelings of generosity, but would make his opponent pay the uttermost penalty of his hostility.

"Of course he won't give me another farthing after I marry Mary," he reflected; "that is the most certain event on the card; and I shall have to give up my seat. Well, I fancy the Radicals would kick me out at any rate, so *that* loss is not so great after all. I believe Mary has a little trifle—but that I would not be mean enough to touch. But Dora surely would not see us starve, although she has grown strangely stingy of late. And then perhaps the Government might do something for me, confound 'em; they ought, at any rate, after my support all these years. Hang it! how I wish now that I had wrought in the House, and spoken, and taken to Committees, and all that kind of thing. But that is gone and done. Come what may, I'll take the leap; and Mary is well worth it, the dear creature. How sweet she looked through her tears and trembling as we came along! I wonder if she really can love me. The idea of sacrificing her to that poor mad boy! By Jove, I'll save her, though I should ruin myself in the attempt! Eh, what? Good Lord! if that isn't Jim Colpoys, — and coming out of Brancepeth's Bank too, of all places in this world;" and a few strides brought him up with the person he had descried, whom he arrested with a hearty slap on the shoulder.

"What, Jim, old fellow!" cried George, extending his hand heartily; "what wind has blown you to Earlsport? Of all points of the compass, I would have least expected to meet you in the old town again."

Colonel Colpoys was a shorter man than his brother, and for the broad, open, somewhat florid face of the other, with his light hair and blue eyes, had a dark, sharply-cut face, clean-shaven except for a slight black moustache, and with a keen, piercing glance that looked straight through and through his *vis-à-vis.* His bearing was military though not soldierly, turfy but not horsey, sporting but not raffish; and his companions were wont to say that a better-groomed man than Jim Colpoys did not tread Pall Mall.

"And now," said George, "tell us all about it. Of course you didn't come here to see Earlsfield, and we have no races about. Any fellows here that you have been bringing to book? What *is* up?"

"Nothing very important," replied the colonel, smiling. "I *had* a little business in Earlsport, and so I thought I would run down and see to it myself. No; I didn't think of leaving a card at the Court. How are they all? amiable as usual? Earlsfield screwing sixpences out of these wretched tenants of his, and sister Firebrace mourning over her 'Morning Manna.' A lively time you must have! You have got Dora there just now, I believe?"

"Yes," responded George; and then suddenly, as an idea struck him, "You haven't been bleeding her, Jim, have you?" he asked, anxiously. He had hoped to essay that process in his own behalf at a very early opportunity.

"Make your mind easy," said the colonel, with a laugh. "I haven't seen Dora. You have that field all to yourself."

"It has not been much of a field lately," said George, with a sigh. "She is getting to be uncommon close, Dora is, compared with what she used to be."

"Well," observed the colonel, with a queer smile, "avarice is a common vice of old maids; and I suppose Dora may be set down as one. There is not much chance of her marrying now, is there?"

"As if Earlsfield would allow her—selfish brute that he is!" cried the member, indignantly; and then, as his own great perplexity crossed his mind, and a longing to unburden himself even to such a scamp as Jim Colpoys seized him with irresistible force, he added, "Come along with me to the club, and let us have a drink and a chat. There is something I want badly to tell you. I am going to get into a dreadful mess."

"Hem!" said the colonel, guardedly. "I was to have taken the first train back. And now look here, George, it is no use asking me to help you, for I have a big settling day on Monday." "He saw me coming out of the bank, and guessed I had got money," reflected the colonel to himself; "and I promised Barbara not to break bulk," he concluded inwardly.

"It is not money," said George, gloomily; "it is quite another kind of trouble."

"All right," returned the colonel, cheerily. "I am your man so far as good advice goes. It has always been a specialty of mine to give good advice and take none myself. It is more blessed to give than to receive, is my motto."

But instead of the club, the colonel moved as an amendment that they should refresh themselves in the "Colpoys' Arms." In days before his excommunication from the Court, Jim Colpoys had been much about Earlsport, and as he gave himself no airs and freely borrowed the money of all the leading citizens who were willing to lend him any, he was naturally not anxious by his reappearance in their midst to revive the memory of many ancient I O U's which had long been covered by the dust of oblivion. And so the brothers made for the old hotel, where the coaches had stopped in the days before railways, where the Colpoys candidate had held his headquarters at election times, and had addressed his constituents from the bow-window after he had been duly chaired. But the "Arms" had now fallen from its high estate, and took tavern rank, resignedly yielding the palm to its palatial competitors which had sprung up around the railway station. But it was in a snug enough parlour, with an air of subdued old-fashioned gentility about it, that the colonel and the member found themselves lounging over their cigars and brandy-and-soda.

"And now tell me all about it," asked the colonel, as he leaned back and pushed out his legs to pull another chair towards him whereon to deposit them. "Out with the murder."

"Tell me first," said George, "what you were doing in Brancepeth's. You don't mean to say that you got them to do a bill for you?"

"Umph!" returned the other. "It is wonderful where business will lead you. It brought me to Brancepeth's, and, singular to tell, they did do a bill for me."

"You don't say so?" cried George in amazement. "Upon my word, I never heard of such a thing. I once tried it on with old Brancepeth ages ago, and the look he gave me as he bowed me out froze my vitals for a week afterwards. I wish you would tell me how you did it."

"Security, my boy, good security," responded the colonel, loftily; "without that you can do nothing with bankers. But go on with your story."

Much marvelling what manner of security

Jim Colpoys could offer that would be acceptable in the eyes of so cautious a firm as Brancepeth Brothers, George did at last unfold his tale : how Lord Earlsfield had decided to marry Harold to Miss Donne ; and what a fine, warm-hearted girl Mary was, and as beautiful as an angel too, by Jove ; and how it was an infernal sacrifice of the girl's future and feelings to force her to marry a fellow who was every now and then mad, and would assuredly go mad altogether some day ; and how Mary, though she loathed the idea, would undoubtedly be coerced into compliance with Lord Earlsfield's views ; and how altogether it was a shame, a most infernal shame ; and how he, George, would be eternally condemned, if he did not put a spoke in Lord Earlsfield's coach which would upset the whole concern.

Jim Colpoys heard all this in placid silence, with his eyes fixed dreamily upon his brother, as if the subject were quite transcendental to his interests ; and after George had finished there was a considerable pause, filled up by gentle whiffs of smoke and modest application to the tumbler.

"Well?" inquired the colonel at length, when his brother showed no further signs of proceeding with his disclosures.

"Well!" re-echoed George; "well! what do you say to that?"

"Why, I say nothing; what does it matter to you or me?"

"Matter! why, it matters everything. Do you think I am going to let such an iniquitous marriage take place?"

"Why shouldn't you? What business is it of yours except for the reversion of the title and estates, and I should say Earlsfield's life is quite as good as yours or mine. You don't want to marry Miss Donne yourself, do you?"

"That is exactly what I mean to do," spluttered George, as in his excitement he nearly choked himself with brandy-and-soda.

The colonel only gave a long low whistle, and smoked steadily on with half-closed eyes.

"Well?" asked George at length, "what

do you say? What do you advise me to do?"

"What is your game?" inquired the colonel, half confidentially.

"My game? why, what game is there? I step in and marry Miss Donne. I don't see much game in that—at least, I don't see much winnings in it."

The colonel again smoked on in deep reflection. At last he said, "Well, George, you are a greater flat than ever I have taken you for, and that is saying not a little. I suppose even *you* yourself"—with a certain contemptuous emphasis on the pronoun—"must have been able to see all the other sides of this question. You quarrel for good and all with Earlsfield; you lose your seat for the borough; you endow Miss Donne with debts in lieu of worldly goods; and you bring all your creditors in a pack about your ears. Any one can see that. But what I don't see, and what I bet you don't see yourself, is how on earth you are to live."

"That is so," said George sadly.

"And I suppose you would have to run away with her—elopement and special licence, and all that kind of thing?"

"Of course," returned the member blankly; "it would never do to let Earlsfield know until it was all over. He would be sure to find some way of stopping the business," he added gloomily, as if half uncertain whether such things as dungeons and *lettres de cachet* were not among the engines which his dreaded elder brother would bring to bear against them. "What would you advise me to do?" he asked anxiously.

"I suppose you have quite made up your mind about the matter?" said the other.

"Quite,—as firm as a rock," said George defiantly.

"Well, I had thought so. It is no use saying to you 'Don't.' Fellows never ask advice until they have quite made up their mind to take their own way. I really don't see how you can turn yourself. It seems to me it will be a pretty tight fit."

"Just think it over, there's a good fellow," pleaded George. "You have always had a much longer head than I have got."

And the colonel did think it over. Or rather he was thinking, would it be worth his while to give Lord Earlsfield a hint of what was going on, and what sum he could reasonably hope to extract from his lordship as the price of such important information. "It would really be doing George a service, and the girl too," urged one tempter; but another broke in with, "Your revenge upon Lord Earlsfield—the harsh and arbitrary way in which he has treated you—his hardness about money matters—and his ostracism of you and your wife and children." And the milder demon of the two triumphed, for after a little the colonel remarked in a more kindly tone—

"Well, it is not a very bright outlook, but you must get the Government to do something for you."

"But what can they do? or what can

I do? I would take anything that would afford the ghost of a living, but I am too old for Civil Service commissioners and competition, and that kind of humbug."

"Well," said the colonel, "I had a long talk with Elliott, one of your Whips, yesterday. He asked me to go down with him to Epsom to his trainer's, and give him my opinion upon a colt he thinks of trying for the Derby. A likely horse he is too—Clytus his name—I advise you to keep your eye upon him,—though I doubt," he added, reflectively, "if he has enough of bone in the hock. Well, I had a long chat with Elliott as we came back to town, and he *would* talk politics. The short and the long of it is, that the Government is in a mess through the defeat of the new Solicitor-General at Widgley last week. The Conservatives cut him out when he sought re-election, and it was most gratifying to hear how Elliott swore at their treachery. The Government can't get on without him, and they can't light upon a safe seat for him anywhere."

"Well?" returned George, uninterestedly.

"Well, he also told me that Godfrey, the Chairman of the Docks and Canals Board, was dead, and that the Treasury was being worried to death by applicants for the post."

"I knew Godfrey when he was in the House—a surly old brute," observed George. "But what has all this to do with my business? I don't believe they would make me chairman. And Elliott owes me a grudge since last session for not turning up at divisions."

"Why, can't you see, man," cried the colonel, impatiently, "you have got to give up your seat any way. Drive a bargain with the Government for the Board of Docks and Canals against your seat for the Solicitor-General. In their present circumstances they are bound to say done with you."

"By Jove, Jim, you are a trump," cried the member, jumping up and wringing his brother's hand. "Docks and Canals is £1500, and it is just a fortune to us at present. I'll do it, by all that is blue, and we'll have another brandy-and-soda to drink Mary Donne's health. What a head you have! Why, I should never have put things together in that way. And now I can hold my own with Earlsfield, let him do his worst."

When there had been a further consumption of brandy-and-soda, and Mary Donne's health and George's happiness duly pledged by the colonel, George saw the other off by train. He was in a state of the highest elation, and eager to begin operations at once. To-morrow he would start for London, and tickle Ministers with the bait of his seat.

"Won't Earlsfield storm when he knows," he chuckled. "Well, it is every one for himself in this world, and with no one more than Earlsfield. And I shouldn't wonder though the Solicitor got thrashed after all," he grinned. "The Rads were uncommon strong last election. Well, I shall be all right anyhow by that time, and let them take their chance." And with these reflections, which showed that there was yet room for great development in his moral nature, the member set out gaily on his way back to the Court.

That evening, when Mary Donne went to her room to dress for dinner, she found a note lying on her dressing-table with a neat little packet inside. It was a beautiful ruby ring, for the cost of which the name of the Hon. George Colpoys, M.P., had that day been duly entered as debtor in the books of Messrs Morton & Byng, Goldsmiths and Jewellers, Exchange Street, Earlsport. The note contained but a few lines:—

DEAREST MARY,—If you have not forgotten, and have forgiven our talk this morning, let me see you wear this ring to-night, and ever afterwards, until I replace it by another. I have found a way to put everything smooth. I am off to London to begin the business. Think of me until I come back.—Yours ever, G. C.

George marked with a glow of delight the ruby glistening on Mary's finger when she took her seat at table. Lord Earlsfield, too, marked both it and George's glance towards it; and made up his mind that the time had come for him to put his foot firmly down on such foolery.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A FAMILY MATTER.

We must go back a little earlier in the day than the conversation we have just reported, and ascertain the cause of so unusual a circumstance as the honour done by Colonel Colpoys to his native town of paying it a visit. Since accident had led him to suspect that his sister Dorothy had a secret, and he had successfully set all his wits to work to discover wherein it had consisted, Jim Colpoys had been greatly exercised in his mind as to how he was to make most of the hold he had got over her. With consummate judgment he took in all the facts and aspects of the case as concerned both Dorothy and her husband: his sister's nervousness and dread of their elder brother; the inevitable sequestration of Dorothy's fortune by Lord Earlsfield as soon as it was disclosed that she had violated the terms of her aunt's will; her natural wish to keep things quiet and enjoy both her husband and her money,—all these the colonel read as legibly as in a book. Less clear was the position of Brancepeth, who, he had ascertained, was now reconciled to his father, and a partner in the Earlsport Bank, and therefore presumably in an independent position. But the fact that Brancepeth showed no disposition of disclosing the marriage was a comfort to the colonel.

"All these Brancepeths have been money-grubbers, and they will keep Dora's money among them as long as they can get it," he argued. "It is decidedly their interest to keep quiet; and I don't see why they should not have to pay for silence. I, at least, ought to get a commission."

Like most men who make a comfortable living out of their wits, Jim Colpoys was too prudent a man to hazard killing a goose whose eggs were golden. This secret he regarded as a part of his capital to be by no means drawn out, although it must be necessarily made to yield him a fair return. He had already extracted a first draught from Dorothy's fear, and would have been willing to let the Brancepeths alone for a time, had not an unexpected event occurred to derange his plans. A young Californian, who had inherited a silver-mine, and a million or two of paternal dollars to boot, had begun to plunge in London society, and among the many who had been trying to get in their hand, Jim Colpoys, unluckily, had been one of the first. The colonel had sat down to cards with the youngster with calm faith of assurance that here was a fish worth giving play to, and had obligingly gone on losing even when the stakes became high, and were doubled and redoubled; but when he settled himself down to win, he found his adversary a perfect "Heathen Chinee." Jim Colpoys had nothing to teach this graduate of the gambling schools of the Great West, and had to acknowledge to himself that he had met his match either at fair play or foul. But cards are only one branch of the noble art of pigeoning, and Jim felt that in other departments he had still a chance. The youth was rolling in dollars, was free-handed if he was fond of winning, and, under skilful phlebotomy, might cut up well if bled freely. The colonel felt bound in honour not to drop the game; and he must at once take up his I O U's to the Californian, and set himself to obtain his revenge. But how were these I O U's to be taken up? Dorothy's cheque was already melted, and there was no other means of raising money in prospect. Then it was that the colonel bethought himself of his newly acquired kinsfolk the Brancepeths.

"It is worth giving it a trial," the colonel said as he started; "at all events it will let us see how the land lies with the Brancepeths. If they cut up rough, why, it will be a good excuse for coming down again on Dorothy."

"Mind your hand and you must take your trick," advised his wife; "and for heaven's sake don't come back without money. I must have Jim removed to a better school. These boys at Parker's are corrupting him. I caught him smoking the other day; and the vicar's wife told me she heard him swearing at Haines the postman."

"D—d young rip," muttered the colonel angrily, as he gave his wife a tender kiss of good-bye. Mrs Colonel Colpoys was a smart little dark woman with no particular good looks, but the most affectionate wife and the best mother in existence. She only wanted independent means of living to develop all the highest feminine virtues. She would have been broken-hearted at discovering a taint of vice or a dishonest trait in one of her children but she could advise the colonel in making up his betting-book, and there was no one like her for "putting him up to a thing or two," as he admiringly confessed. There are such anomalies.

So the colonel presented himself at the Earlsport Bank and sent in his card for Mr Stephen. He had tried to think over a line of action coming down in the train, and had resolved to be guided by events as they might arise. But when he was shown into the presence of both the partners, he felt for an instant rather taken aback.

Stephen, who was with his father when Colonel Colpoys's card was brought to him, handed it to the old man with a bitter smile.

"He is come to attempt to black-mail me, of course," he said; "how sick I am of all this concealment, with its worry and anxiety! I shall send him off at once, and then the murder will be out—and a good thing too."

"Hear what he has to say first," counselled the more cautious senior. "Take care, and don't do anything rash. Remember you owe something to your wife's feelings, and Colonel Colpoys is now your brother-in-law."

"Brother-in-law! A blackleg!"

"At all events, better have him in here, as I know all about the matter. If he has come to black-mail, he won't find it so easy to have to do with two instead of one."

And this was exactly how the colonel found it. He was a man, however, of assurance and resource, and having returned the bows of both, at once addressed himself to the younger.

"My business is with you, sir; may I beg of you to give me the pleasure of five minutes' private conversation?"

"If you are come to congratulate my son upon his marriage with your sister, colonel, you may speak freely before me. Won't you take a chair?" said the old man, benignly regarding his visitor through his spectacles.

And the colonel did take a chair, or rather sank into it with a suppressed "Ah!" but in the same breath he had recovered his composure.

"Well, that was exactly the reason of my calling. Took the occasion of my being in Earlsport, you know. I am sure I trust you will both be happy," with a gracious smile to Stephen, who sat gloomily facing him. "But upon my word, I was never more surprised in my life. We had all set my sister down as destined to be an old maid," and he smiled in turn upon Mr Brancepeth senior.

"We were all surprised," rejoined the old man.

"And when, may I ask, do you intend to announce your marriage?" asked the colonel again, turning to Stephen with a gracious interest. "As I gather, it has not yet been broken to the family generally."

"Through no fault on my part," said Stephen, haughtily. "My wife, for reasons of her own, has wished the matter kept private—very much against my will, I must say."

"Ah yes, very naturally," returned the colonel in a sympathising voice. "I can easily understand her position. The unfortunate conditions in my aunt's will——"

"Are of no consequence to me," interrupted Stephen—"or, for that matter, to my wife either."

"No, I suppose not," assented the colonel; "every one knows the position and wealth of Brancepeth Brothers. Even a fortune such as Dora had left her cannot be of much consequence in their estimation;" and the colonel courteously bowed to the senior partner.

"I suppose Earlsfield will enforce his rights," continued Jim; "although I am sure I hope that, for the credit of the family, he will take a more generous view of the subject. But Earlsfield is a grasping man, as I have reason to know by experience."

"I make Lord Earlsfield quite welcome to his rights," drily replied Stephen.

"Come, that is very handsomely said," broke in the colonel, "and I only wish that the reversion of Dorothy's money had been to go to myself, who want it most of all the

Colpoyses. But to him that hath shall be given. I suppose I had better keep quiet about the subject when I see Lord Earlsfield?"

"Not on my account, I assure you," observed Stephen. "I am extremely anxious that his lordship should be informed."

"I think," put in the old banker, quietly, "that this is a matter in which the lady herself ought to be deferred to. We ought to allow the Honourable Mrs Brancepeth to consult her own feelings about the proper time and place for taking Lord Earlsfield into her confidence."

"You are quite right, sir, perfectly right, exclaimed the colonel; "Dora ought to be allowed to manage the matter her own way. And now, as I am here, and find myself among relatives—and I am sure we shall be harmonious ones—will you pardon me if I trouble you with a little matter of business of my own? I know how cautious you bankers are—necessarily must be—and that you will not look at personal security; and yet that is what I have to propose. You see, I have been put upon a Californian investment, a thing involving and promising a return that will be a fortune to a poor man like me. I have been casting about in my mind everywhere for the money to buy into it, and was just thinking of getting Lord Earlsfield to help me, when your kind reception emboldened me to think that perhaps you might act as my bankers for the occasion. A short loan on a three months' bill, and an undertaking as safe as the bank. Now that we are connected together, I would as soon come to you in my straits as to Lord Earlsfield," added the colonel significantly, as he paused for breath.

"You do us much honour," the senior was slowly beginning, when Stephen promptly broke in—

"Look here, Colonel Colpoys, let us understand each other thoroughly. I have told you the plain truth that it is my most earnest wish that Lord Earlsfield should know at once of my marriage to his sister, and instead of paying you to conceal the fact——"

"Sir," interrupted the colonel, rising in righteous wrath, "do you actually think that I—I who have borne her Majesty's commission—have come here to levy black-mail upon you? My character must have been strangely misrepresented to you. You will permit me to take leave of you;" but though he took up his hat, he did not move to the door.

"Stay, colonel," interposed the old banker, quietly; "you misunderstand. Stephen, I am sure, meant no such imputation. The idea is quite absurd. But as you very rightly say, an advance on personal security is not our way of doing business, and you see how averse Stephen is to it. But as you say, we are all relatives now, and I would not like our first meeting as such to have any cloud cast upon it. For once in a way I think, Stephen, we may break through our rules to oblige your brother-in-law. How much do you want, colonel?"

"A—a thousand pounds," gasped Jim, hurriedly, as in his haste he sought for a golden mean between too much and too little.

While the banker was drawing out a bill, the colonel turned towards Stephen and said to him with courteous earnestness, "I trust you will come to understand me better, Mr Brancepeth, though I daresay one time or another you may have heard things that were not to my credit. I am sure I hope we shall be good friends; and if I can help you in any way with Lord Earlsfield, it will be a pleasure to do so."

"You are very kind, colonel," put in the old man, as he pushed a bill towards the colonel to sign, "but we Brancepeths have always held our own legs, and hope to do so. We feel honoured in being connected with the Earlsfield family, and are prepared to meet his lordship in any way. If he claims my daughter-in-law's money, we shall offer no opposition; if he leaves her in possession, I shall make a settlement of an equal amount on my son."

"Very handsome, very handsome indeed," commented Jim, "and I think Lord Earlsfield ought to be highly satisfied. And now, if you will allow me, I shall just say what pleasure it has given me to make my brother-in-law's acquaintance, and thank you, sir, for your kind accommodation."

"Just for this occasion, colonel," smiled the banker, as he shook hands. "I have done a very unbusiness-like thing, and my partner, you see, is annoyed with me. I should not venture on doing it again."

"I shall debit you with that thousand pounds, Stephen," said the banker, when their visitor had gone with a cheque in his pocket. "We have seen the last of it. The scamp meant to have gone straight to Lord Earlsfield."

"I wish he had," said Stephen, gloomily.

"He has succeeded all the same, however, thanks to you. But he shall never have another sixpence from me."

"I don't think he will try it again," said the banker, as he made a memorandum. "At all events, if anything is to be done by your wife's managing Lord Earlsfield in her own way, it is only right to give her a chance. We need not fling away her money, if we can help it. No, I don't think Colonel Colpoys will trouble us again."

Colonel Colpoys was of the same opinion himself, when he sufficiently recovered his faculties to form one at all upon the interview which he had just gone through, which was not until he had seated himself in a railway carriage after his encounter with the member, and had taken out the cheque to convince himself that he was wide awake.

"That was a tight hand, and I am not sure that I played my best, though I have landed the stakes," he soliloquised. "A very good game, to meet me two to one, with the sulky defiance of the young fellow and the bland rascality of the old chap. They evidently want to keep their hands on Dora's money, and are sure that Earlsfield will kick up a dust. Well, let them; it is the best thing for me, but I won't attempt the Brancepeths again. The old man as good as warned me not to. No, Dora must be put under contribution for the future."

"A nice pickle is preparing for Earlsfield," he muttered to himself, as he lit a cigar and made himself comfortable with his head in a corner and his feet on the opposite cushion. "Dora privately married, George eloping with Miss Donne, and all his schemes for his son knocked over. Well, he has made every one give way to him all his life, the old Juggernauth car, and we shall see how he likes it himself. Certainly I am not going to spoil sport. I don't believe I could make anything out of Earlsfield; and as for the new hedge George's marriage will put between me and the title, why, it does not count. It has always been too far off from me, confound it! So they may raise old pandemonium at Earlscourt for all I care."

And the colonel relapsed into dreamy visions of squeezing gold from every pore of his Californian, which kept his mind occupied until he arrived in peace with honour and the cheque in the bosom of his family.

CHAPTER XXXV.

A TANGLED WEB.

It began to strike the family at Earlscourt that Harold had infected his aunt with his passion for natural science, for not only had she asked him to take her to see the Museum, but had come back delighted and full of interest with its marvels, and quite ready to repeat her visit. In fact she was always proposing to accompany Harold; and that young gentleman would probably have been bored with Dorothy's company; and, with that regard for his own comfort and his own way which he was allowed to take unchallenged at the Court, he would probably have put a summary stop to his aunt's new passion for natural history, had not their conversation possessed a mutual fund of interest. This was the beauty and perfections of Cloete Sparshott, to which Harold was never tired of listening. Dorothy had made the acquaintance of the curator's daughter, and had charmed the girl with her kindliness and affability. Cloete had mixed so little with the society of ladies, that when Miss Colpoys became a visitor to the Museum, and came up-stairs in the afternoon for a cup of tea and a comfortable chat — which generally involved an exposition of the goodness and nobleness and cleverness of her nephew Harold — Cloete became sympathetically attached to her, and looked forward to her comings as the great events of her life. But it was not alone Cloete that Dorothy tried to engross. As far as she could she tried to capture the Doctor himself; and often when Cloete and Harold were having a *tête-à-tête* talk, she would drag the curator down-stairs to show her some rarity, and listen with an ineffable patience for half an hour at least to his disquisitions without understanding a single word of them. All this seemed quite natural to the simple-minded people of the Museum. Cloete enjoyed hearing Harold talk about the foreign capitals he had lived in, and all that he had seen and done; and the Doctor found Miss Colpoys a singularly docile student, who with a lamentable ignorance of elementary facts was yet anxious to improve her mind by an acquaintance with the great principles of science.

A very slight perspicuity might have shown even such unsophisticated minds as those of Cloete and her father that their visitors were driving at something ulterior. Cloete, indeed, was woman enough to be conscious that Harold Colpoys was much impressed by her; she was even woman enough to feel a little vain of making an evident conquest, and not indisposed to improve it. But all this was quite harmless, quite justifiable, in the safety with which the great distance between Harold and herself surrounded her. She was agreeably pleased and flattered for the moment; perhaps she may have flirted just enough to continue his encouragement; but no idea ever entered her mind that the young man was being seriously attracted towards her, or that anything was to come of his visits. Nor did she see anything in the praises with which Dorothy plied her nephew any more than an aunt's natural fondness or affection.

"You see, my dear," Dorothy told her in a moment of confidence, "people used to think that Harold was queer—that he was not just himself at times; but there was nothing in it. It was all his delicate health when he was a boy that made them keep him abroad; and since he has grown up and become robust he is quite like other people, only a great deal more clever."

"A great deal more clever," Cloete had warmly assented.

Lord Earlsfield had not failed to mark how frequently Dorothy was now accompanying Harold, and the circumstance struck him as one that might be turned to good account.

"I don't see what you can find to amuse yourself with in the Museum," he had said; "but since you do go there, I wish you would have an eye to Harold, and keep him out of mischief with that collector's—that curator's daughter. He seems to be inclined to be fascinated with her; and any entanglement of that description—especially so near as Earlsport—would be about the worst thing that could befall him."

"Oh, you may make your mind easy," Dorothy reassured him. "I don't think Miss Sparshott is at all the person to seek to entangle any one. She seems a quiet, modest, well-behaved girl. I think you need feel no alarm from that quarter."

"I hope not," answered Lord Earlsfield, doubtfully; "but all the same, I shall be very glad if you can continue to look after them. You will particularly oblige me, Dora, by giving me early warning for any need of my interference."

This Dorothy readily promised. Lord Earlsfield's remarks introduced, however, a new and disturbing element into Dorothy's schemes. In her short-sightedness she had not calculated upon the consequences to herself and her own plans if Lord Earlsfield discovered that she had been abetting his son in a clandestine wooing. She had only thought of ridding herself of a rival in her husband's affection by getting Cloete Sparshott to fall in love with her nephew. Dorothy had but small talent for finesse, and she had been so struck with the daring cleverness of her original conception that she had overlooked the attendant risks. She must work more guardedly. She had already effected something, she thought, in the way of bringing Harold and Cloete more closely together, and she must curtail her visits to the Museum.

Meanwhile Dorothy's more domestic affairs were not in a happy train. Her private visits to the Dunes House had gone on without detection, but they had been productive of little pleasure to either husband or wife. After her *rencontre* with Cloete Sparshott at the bank, Dorothy had appeared at the Dunes House in a storm of passionate jealousy, which Brancepeth had met with callous stolidity. He positively asserted that his old sweetheart had merely called upon a matter of business, and that his duty required him to see her or any one else who had a business excuse for calling. And when Dorothy had taunted him about still loving the girl, he had turned upon her by accusing her of keeping Lord Earlsfield in the dark and himself in a false position.

"The whole blame is your own," he pettishly argued. "If you would tell your brother, or let me tell him for you, as I have a right to do, all your fears will be removed at once. Come and take your place here, and all room for your absurd jealousy will be gone. Once it is known that I am a married man, the rivals whom you are silly enough to conjure up in your own mind will speedily disappear. You wish me to be looked upon as a bachelor; could you blame me if I were to behave as such?"

"Yes, I could," replied Dorothy. "I am your wife, and you have no right to commit such a sin as to encourage any woman who does not know that you are married."

"I encourage them!" repeated Brancepeth, indignantly. "I encourage no one. It is you who are the cause of any misunderstanding that may arise, by your obstinacy and silence. Publish your marriage, and come straight to my house, and you will soon see how naturally our surroundings will adapt themselves to our position."

"And my money?" sighed Dorothy.

"I shall have enough for us both," returned her husband. But Dorothy was still haunted by the dread that by losing her fortune she would also lose her hold upon her husband. Equally with her dread of Lord Earlsfield's wrath, this fear, that when her money was gone she would lose all importance in Brancepeth's eyes, had been the cause of her procrastination. She worshipped her husband, not after the equal and even-minded way of a woman whose love has a stable foundation in respect, but rather with the jealousy of one who has secured a treasure, and dreads her monopoly of it being endangered. As it seemed to her, she had bought Brancepeth with her money—saved him for herself when he was penniless, ill, and perhaps dying; and now that he was again reinstated in his father's favour and with ample wealth at command, he was anxious to buy back his freedom. That was how Dorothy put it to herself, and she loathed the reconciliation with his father and his new connection with the bank from the bottom of her heart. She had once thought to solve the difficulty by again retreating to the Continent and carrying her husband with her. But Brancepeth had promptly declared against the possibility of such a step.

"No, I must stick to the bank now I am in it," had been his positive answer; "and we cannot leave Earlsport until after the declaration of our marriage. It was at your wish I came back, and we must take all the consequences that have followed upon it. Besides, you ought surely to be glad that things have turned out as they have done. We are now independent of Lord Earlsfield, whatever course he chooses to take."

Dorothy could not very well explain that it was this independence which seemed to her the most objectionable feature in the situation; but to all her arguments Brancepeth had the crushing rejoinder, "Tell Lord Earlsfield, and you will see that everything will come right for us; never mind about the money." But the money was power, *her* power; and if she had to part with that, what would be her hold on her husband? Dorothy felt keenly the disparity in their ages; and though she looked much younger than her years, her mirror told her truths which could happily be hid from the world. Whatever hold she had possessed over Brancepeth's affection when she had him all to herself, and when he was thrown entirely upon her society, had, she felt, become much impaired by their *quasi* separation since they came to Earlsport, and the reappearance of Cloete Sparshott as a disturbing element. Somehow all Dorothy's difficulties seemed to centre themselves around this rival, and if she could only be got out of the way, all, she fondly flattered herself, might yet be well.

"You must promise me that you will never see her again," Dorothy had imperatively ordered her husband; "that she shall not come back to your office, and that you will avoid her whenever you see her."

"How can I do that?" had been the rather obstinate rejoinder; "Miss Sparshott has business at the bank. Her father is in money difficulties, and the old fossil is incapable of doing anything for himself; his daughter has all the trouble."

"Ah, then," cried Dorothy, joyfully, "I shall make that straight for them, and she need not trouble you more. I shall give her what money is necessary."

"You must do nothing of the kind," interrupted Brancepeth, sternly. "You have no right to know anything of their troubles. It came to my knowledge as a mere matter of business and in strict confidence, and I had no right to say anything about it to you. Your interference would only pain them, and make them think that their distress was becoming public property."

"At least, if I give you the money, you can pay off their debts and have done with them altogether," retorted Dorothy, with considerable asperity.

"No, that cannot be done either," with equal doggedness. "The fact is, you know nothing of the business, and would make matters much worse by meddling in it."

"I know enough of the business to know

that you are making it an excuse for having interviews with Miss Sparshott, and carrying on a flirtation with her perhaps."

"Dorothy, how can you be so provokingly absurd, so insulting to me? Ever since my return my acquaintance with Miss Sparshott has been upon the most formal and distant footing. Indeed I have told her that circumstances have occurred which can never allow us to be on more than the merest terms of friendship."

"You have: then you have been speaking to her of—of things?" gasped Dorothy.

"Of nothing more than was due as an explanation to a woman to whom I had been once engaged, and to whom my conduct seemed in a measure to require clearing up. And now, Dorothy, once for all, drop these silly suspicions, and let us spend the occasions when we do see one another in peace and happiness."

But Dorothy still refused to be comforted; and if she did not go so far as Job, and actually curse the day when she was born, and when her mother had brought a woman-child into the world, she bewailed her hard lot in tearful language, and accused her husband, Lord Earlsfield, and Cloete Sparshott, of being leagued together to work her unhappiness. Once upon a time her tears and distress would have wrung Brancepeth's heart; but he was growing in marital experience, and knew that it was better to let the ferment work itself off before he sought to administer consolation. When Dorothy's tears and bemoanings had fairly exhausted themselves, he took her tenderly enough in his arms and soothed her emotions, protesting his love for her, and the groundlessness of her jealous fears.

"Let us throw off the mask," he urged, "and all our troubles will at once vanish. We shall be always together, except when I am at the bank, and there will be no room left in your life for silly thoughts."

And Dorothy had perforce to be coaxed

and comforted, and to promise that she would certainly screw up her courage and tell Lord Earlsfield—in a fortnight at the longest—well, certainly before the end of the month. And she went back to the Court, and, aided by the faithful Minton, regained her room without any one being aware of her absence; and sat down sadly to consider the position. In days when Lord Earlsfield had doomed her to celibacy, she had looked upon marriage as a temporal salvation; but it had not so turned out. It had only brought her fresh troubles, fresh anxieties; and every remedy that she could think of resorting to only seemed likely to plunge her into fresh and increasing difficulties. Poor Dorothy! she had no comforter and no confidant, and her way in the future seemed to grow blacker and blacker as she looked before her.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

DIPLOMACY.

The honourable member for Earlsport betook himself to town in high spirits, and with an assured conviction that he carried a bargain in his pocket which the Government could not fail to jump at. The ethical aspects of the idea probably never presented themselves to his mind, or if they did, they threw no scruples in the way of his course. Even in his Cambridge days, when he had prepared himself for the life of a legislator by cultivating the virtue of silence in the Union, George Colpoys had never troubled himself with such transcendental subjects as whether the franchise was a right or a trust, or whether a member of Parliament was a delegate or a deputy. His practical mind brushed away all the cobwebs of political precisianism; and he calmly regarded the idea of swopping the borough of Earlsport—always supposing the Solicitor-General could carry it—for the Chairmanship of the Board of Docks and Canals, as quite a natural and legitimate piece of business. In justice to him, it must be stated that the idea of consulting his constituents on the subject never for a moment crossed his imagination. If he did feel any qualms, it was at the thought of how Lord Earlsfield would feel when he found that the borough had been bartered away without his knowledge and sanction. If there was any sin involved in the matter it must lie in this; for it was an article in George's political creed that Earlsport belonged to the Colpoyses, and that they could do what they liked with their own.

"Suppose they ask me point-blank if Earlsfield will support the Solicitor," mused George on his way up, as an unforeseen contingency presented itself in a threatening aspect. "I can't tell them a thundering lie, which they would very soon find out for themselves; and if I let out that he knows nothing of my intentions, why, I may whistle for the post. I must trust to luck, and try to dodge them somehow or other."

Arrived in town, George Colpoys avoided his clubs, and took up his quarters in a quiet hotel. He was too good-natured a man to wake unpleasant memories in the minds of creditors, or make the privileges of Parliament invidious in his own person by showing himself freely about town. Nor did he manifest himself to any of his colleagues either in the House or in the lobby, but quietly sat down after dinner and penned a note to Mr Elliott, the senior Ministerial Whip, asking for a short interview on the morrow. A brief note written by a secretary appointed his audience at two o'clock, and George found the busy Whip in a most ungracious humour. There had been a count out the night before, when a private member's bill which the Government had promised to countenance had been attempted to be discussed; and not only had that private member written hard things to Elliott, and threatened the withdrawal of his own and his friends' support, but the morning papers had made themselves disagreeable, and had twitted the Government with the waste of public time. He had also a long list of recalcitrant members who were either threatening to go abroad or to the country, or who were consulting doctors for an excuse of absenting themselves, and with each and all of these he would have to personally deal. So it was with rather an ungracious manner that he gave George two fingers, and motioned him to a seat, while he planted himself with his back to the fire and his arms under his coat-tails.

"Well, Colpoys, glad to see you back again," he observed, in the tone of a head-master welcoming a boy back to school after an attack of the measles, and wondering at the same time how soon it would be before the birch would have to come into play. "Hope you are going to stick to work for the rest of the session—lots of important divisions coming on."

"No," said George; "I think of cutting the whole business—Chiltern Hundreds, and that kind of thing."

"Eh!" ejaculated Mr Elliott, and he sat down and immediately passed the whole political condition of the borough of Earlsport through his mind. It was a safe Liberal seat,—the Earlsfield influence had always been paramount; and if there had been any signs of revolt, they had been solely due to the *lâches* of the sitting member.

"Nothing wrong?" he said presently. "I hope you have no better cause for resignation than weariness of the House. I often wish myself I could get out of the grind."

"I understand the Chairmanship of the

Canals and Docks Board is vacant," was the Scotch answer.

"Well," returned the Whip, raising his eyebrows; "it is and it isn't. It was vacant, but practically we have made up our mind about the appointment."

"In that case," said George, rising, "I need not bother you longer. I called to ask you to give me a turn. My idea was to get you to send me to the Board, and we would give up my seat for the borough in favour of the Solicitor-General. But as you say the matter is as good as settled, we need not say more about it."

"Stop!" shouted the Whip, as George was moving towards the door, and he took a step or two about the room as if in much dubiety. "I don't believe you would be any good at the Canals and Docks," he at last said bluntly.

"I don't suppose I should," said George, calmly; "but surely there are fellows there who could do the work for me."

"Umph!" retorted Mr Elliott. "I expect

if we were to think of *you*, we should have the press down upon us."

"Very likely," retorted George, quietly, "but you surely wouldn't mind that. I know I wouldn't."

"And how about your seat? Would it be safe for the Solicitor-General?" asked Elliott, meditatively.

"Well, the Colpoys candidate has always carried the day," assured George. "Of course I shall recommend him in my address, and do the best I can for him. If we can steal a march on the constituency, he may have a walk over."

Mr Elliott relapsed into thought for a little. "After all," he said, "the Canals and Docks are not much of an office, and we might do something better for so old a supporter as you are. Take the Chiltern Hundreds by all means, and get back to Earlsport and make the running for the Solicitor, and you may depend upon having the first really handsome thing that comes in our way."

"No, thank you," said the member; "it must be a P.P. business or I don't play. Until I see my appointment made out, I keep my seat: once it is booked, I resign immediately."

"You are not up to any trick with us, Colpoys?" asked the Whip, doubtfully. "Remember the Ministry are not to be played with. I confess that I do not quite see your hand."

"I shall show it you in a minute," returned the other with bright frankness. "I am going to marry and settle down at once, and a settled means of subsistence is necessary. That is the whole secret, but as it is a secret I must beg of you to say nothing about it."

"Ah," said the Whip, his countenance clearing, "I begin to understand now. My congratulations. May I inquire if I know the lady?"

"I don't think you do. She is a ward of Lord Earlsfield's and a daughter of Colonel

Donne, who used to be in the House, but before our day. So you see it is all a family matter."

"Ah, indeed! a very happy arrangement. Well, I am sure I am very anxious to oblige so old a friend and colleague as yourself, and I believe Ministers would be glad to do anything to serve Lord Earlsfield. But I must consult the powers that be. Can you call on me to-morrow at this time, and I shall tell you what can be done?"

"Remember," said George, as he took his leave, "that not a soul in the borough has as yet an inkling of my intention, and also that no appointment no seat, and the one before the other."

Next day found Mr Elliott doubtful, not indeed about George's resignation of his seat, which he was willing to accept with the utmost cheerfulness,—"although we are all very sorry indeed to lose you, Colpoys, you know. The Home Secretary spoke quite handsomely about your long and steady support." But there were difficulties about the Docks and Canals Board. Broadly, who had made the subject a specialty, had been as good as promised the appointment, and could make himself uncommonly nasty if he did not get it. He had the ear of the 'Times,' and a lot of personal friends on the front Opposition bench, and there would be no end of a dust if he were passed over.

"All right," George had returned good-humouredly. "Pray don't get into any difficulties on my account. Give Broadly the post by all means, and I shall keep my seat."

"Yes; but then you want to marry, don't you see. An awful bore the House is to a wife! And Docks and Canals is, after all, only fifteen hundred. I think we could do better for you than that."

"Much obliged, I am sure, but I shall keep my seat until the opportunity offers."

"The Governor of the Maldives is dying, and cannot live six months. Three thousand with Government House—we could give you that. And the Consul-Generalship of the Marquesas Islands will soon be vacant—that would be quite in your way: two thousand and a residence at Fatuhuhu—nothing to do, and no newspapers to worry you. We shall certainly have to appoint to that before the year's out."

"Wouldn't have it as a gift," retorted George. "Now look here, Elliott, I won't have any more beating about the bush. Docks and Canals, and the Solicitor is returned for Earlsport. Without that I keep the seat, and when I do give it up, I shall take deuced good care that it does not return a Ministerialist. A fine reward I get for following you all these years!"

Elliott gave him one of his blackest looks. "Well, then, I suppose you must have it, and you had better make up your mind to hear some not very flattering remarks made about yourself in the morning papers. That would not matter so much if we had not to bear the brunt."

"Oh, don't disturb yourself on my account; I really don't care a rush what people say about me," put in George, blandly.

"Well, then, you better get ready your address to your constituents, and send in your application for the Chiltern Hundreds, and we shall see that the Solicitor is ready to take the field."

"I shall do both immediately I receive the official notice of my appointment."

"You shall have that next week," said Elliott, curtly, as he extended a couple of fingers of one hand, and opened the door with the other.

"Well," said George to himself with a sigh of relief, "that is one matter settled; and though Earlsfield storm, and the Solicitor-General be defeated, I shall have my fifteen hundred a-year, and I am hanged if they get me out of it without abolishing the Board, and then they must pension me. Well, I must go back to Earlsport again and prepare Mary for action. We must both make tracks from the Court before anything further is done. That fellow Elliott," he concluded with a grin, "evidently wanted to fob me off with promises; but he will find himself paid off for it if his man is beaten, as I shouldn't wonder though he be if Earlsfield knocks up nasty. Egad! I think I shall write to Mary to-night and tell her all, and go down to Richmond to-morrow and tell Jim all about it. He is such a long-headed chap, he will be sure to give me a tip or two."

So George dined liberally at the Criterion, and looked in at a theatre afterwards; but before going to bed he penned his good news to Mary Donne, and told her that if she would escape the fate that hung over her she must make up her mind to be married immediately, and without beat of drum. "Earlsfield would never stand it if he were to know," he wrote. "He would be sure to find some cunning means of making you marry Harold; and he would certainly tell the Government that I had been humbugging them about the safety of the seat. So you must keep your own counsel, my dear, and have yourself ready in light marching order for an early emergency." It is doubtful whether Mary Donne would have been ready to respond to so peremptory a demand had not George Colpoys's plans received a powerful auxiliary in the person of his elder brother. On the day when George went to Richmond to tell the colonel of his success, and consult with him about what steps he should next take, Lord Earlsfield had requested an interview with Mary in his library. She had gone with a presentiment of what was coming—she had been expecting such a summons for some time; and now when the fatal moment had arrived, George Colpoys, the only one on earth from whom she could expect sympathy or support, was absent. In the dread of the coming interview, she had found her heart go out to him as it had never done before. Why, oh why, was he not there to save her? She would have run away with him to the uttermost parts of the earth rather than face Lord Earlsfield at that moment. Could she be bold? Could she dare to be frank with him and tell him that the marriage he had set his heart upon could not be? It was not, however, easy to be frank with Lord Earlsfield, and opposition had little effect upon him once his mind was made up. And so Mary entered the library, feeling that to all the rest of her misery the humiliation of having to play a part that was more or less double and hypocritical would have to be added. Lord Earlsfield was all grave kindness and benevolence.

"You remember, of course, the talk we had about your future, my dearest Mary," he said, in his most fatherly tones, "and what I said about my wish that you and Harold should marry. Well, since I have seen you both together, I am more than ever convinced of the excellence of the arrangement. I have never seen two young people more naturally made to make each other happy. Harold's aversion to anything like public life exactly corresponds with your domestic tastes"—poor Mary! what other tastes had she ever had the opportunity of cultivating ?—“ and—and the family ties which already bind you together will lay a solid foundation for lasting happiness. You know how I have set my heart on this; and if I thought that I were to leave you as Lady Earlsfield after me, I could die happy and easy in my mind about Harold's future,” he concluded, with a sad smile that touched the girl to the quick.

“But, Lord Earlsfield,” she faltered, when he had paused a minute, as if expecting a reply, “Harold has never said anything to me. Indeed, indeed I have no reason to suppose that he has thought of me at all.”

“Oh,” said Lord Earlsfield, with a forced show of indifference, “young men of Harold's age rarely allow themselves to think of such a serious step as marriage until they have the way made clear for them. He knows nothing as yet of my views, and very probably thinks that I would oppose him settling so soon. So I would have done if he had had his way to make in public life; but since that is not to be"—with a deep sigh—"I shall take care that he understands that I shall throw no obstacles in the way of his happiness. I shall make a point of telling him so at once."

"But, Lord Earlsfield," gasped poor Mary in desperation, "I don't think Harold ever will—ever could care for me; and I—I don't think I could love him."

"Love, Mary," said Lord Earlsfield, shaking his head with an air of judicial sadness, "is a dream that has worked more misery than all the other illusions of life put together. It begins with creating an ideal, then worshipping it, and ends with sitting down to weep among its shattered ruins. It is the most unsound foundation that life can be laid upon. You credit your lover with all the virtues and graces that belong only to a superior order of beings, and as familiarity betrays that you have been deceived in each and every one of them, what then remains to you? You may love on perhaps, but it is not with the feeling that you young girls know and speak of as love. It is with a feeling that is born of respect, that is cemented and strengthened by social ties, by identity of interests, by unity of life. This is the real love that brings happiness, and not that love which is simply the desire for a pleasing and fascinating object, and for the imaginary gratification which its possession would bring. I am an old man, Mary, and know the world, and would have your happiness fixed upon a much securer basis."

And as he delivered this little speech, which he had carefully thought over beforehand, Lord Earlsfield beamed down upon her with the affectionate dignity of a moral philosopher; but Mary still shook her head.

"I could not marry any one that I did not love; and—and," she added, in desperation for an excuse, "Harold has never asked me."

"He will do so, depend upon it, and that soon, and what I want you to promise me is that you will not say 'No.'"

"I cannot promise that, Lord Earlsfield."

"No!" in tones of grave disappointment. "Well, promise me, at least, that you will not make up your mind over-hastily. You know I would do nothing to force your judgment, but you know also how much my heart is set upon this. I have loved you like a father, Mary, and ever since your own dear father left you to my charge I have tried in my way to act as one. To have both my children united would be the crowning joy of my life."

"I do not wish to be ungrateful," said Mary in tears; "believe me, Lord Earlsfield, I wish I could do it, but——"

"But you will think over it," he interrupted; "take time and don't do anything rash. Harold will plead his own cause better than I can for him. And, Mary, if I were you I would be careful not to give George any encouragement by preferring his society to that of, say, Harold. George has always been weak—wretchedly weak—and disposed to amuse his idleness by flirtation. He has now been involved in a good many love-affairs, and I have had much trouble with him. A young girl like you could get no good from him, and it is only right you should be warned. You will think over what I have been saying to you," he concluded, with a persuasive smile, as he opened the door for her.

Mary went straight to her room, and threw herself upon her bed in a state of the deepest dejection. The end seemed to be drawing near, and every prospect of escape closing against her. She had been so accustomed to see Lord Earlsfield's will have the force of law, that she could scarcely realise herself or any one else venturing to dispute it. She had no doubt that Harold would be made by his father to propose to her, and that though she rejected his offer, and told him truly that she could not love him, Lord Earlsfield would bring them both up to the altar. They were but pawns on his chessboard, and he could move them where he pleased. And even if Mary could summon up the desperate courage to rebel, how could she meet the claim which Lord Earlsfield would certainly put forth on the ground of gratitude? This was the weak part of her defence, and the one that she most feared having to capitulate upon. Lord Earlsfield had done a father's duty to her, and had a right to claim her obedience; but what a price was he asking for his guardian care! She had come across one day in the library an old print of a maniac, to whom his beautiful wife and sweet child were clinging in vain attempts to win his recognition; and the picture with the mournful legend underneath it—

> "Forgotten quite
> All former scenes of dear delight,
> Connubial love, parental joy—
> No sympathy like these his soul employ;
> But all is dark within,"—

had seemed to her to too clearly predict her future, and now haunted her thoughts like a waking nightmare. Oh for some escape from fate! Why could she not fly to a convent, to a desert—anywhere? Even death itself was preferable to such a future.

A tap came to the door, which was presently opened by her maid with two or three letters. The first that caught her eye was one from George Colpoys, and tearing it open, she read of the success of his mission to London, of the prospect opened up to them, and of the necessity for their speedy and secret marriage. The last, which would have been the most unpalatable of the member's proposals under ordinary circumstances, was now the one to which she clung with most tenacity. To get away from Earlscourt—and at once—was to her as salvation, and she kissed the letter as its harbinger. She looked at the engagement ring on her finger, and kissed that also.

"Dear George," she murmured, "he is sacrificing much for me, and I will be a good wife to him if I can. And I shall love him —I do love him"—and again the letter was kissed, this time with a rapture that would have elevated George Colpoys—at that instant discussing with the Colonel, over a cigar and brandy-and-soda, the various more or less reputable ways of effecting matrimony —into the seventh heaven of delight if he could have only seen her.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

BREAKING GROUND.

Lord Earlsfield had made many attempts to get Harold to show an interest in the property and position which he was one day to inherit, but hitherto his efforts had met with but indifferent success. The young man listened to his father with a languid interest when the senior talked of farm-letting, of rents, of the curse of repairs, of never allowing tenants to fall into arrears, of the management of coal-mines and the difficulties of dealing with miners, of the troubles from the town property, and the unnatural disposition which the citizens of Earlsport showed to rebel against the benevolent rule of the Earlsfield family.

Harold heard him patiently, but, as Lord Earlsfield could see, without any particular interest in the subject; and if he made a remark or asked a question, it seemed to his father to proceed more from a desire for general information than from the particular interest which he might have been naturally expected to show for matters that would closely concern himself. Lord Earlsfield had gone the length of suggesting that Harold should take Mr Douce, the estate steward, for a tutor, and learn from him the mystery of accounts and the details of the Earlsfield property; but though Harold had not ventured upon an absolute refusal, he had raised so many objections, and had evinced such distaste for the proposal, that his father had been content to drop the subject for a time.

But it was not Lord Earlsfield's habit to give up an idea that he had once seriously formed. He was now beginning to be anxious that his son's future should be settled—that he should marry Miss Donne and take an interest, under Lord Earlsfield's control, in the management of the property. Lord Earlsfield had all the details arranged in his own mind. He even had in his drawer the estimates of the work which would be required to transform the west wing of the Court into suitable suites of rooms for the married couple. There had been an element of reluctance on Mary's part on which he had not calculated, and which rather disappointed him, but which was certainly not going to turn him from his purpose. And Harold had not, as he had fondly imagined, fallen in love with Mary Donne when they found themselves thrown together, the sole young inmates of the house. Lord Earlsfield was rather surprised at this, for he had looked upon the event as a certainty occurring from a law of nature. But if natural law failed in its duty, Lord Earlsfield was quite prepared to do his. He troubled himself little about Harold's evident admiration of Miss

Sparshott — the worst that could come of that would be an entanglement; but even that Lord Earlsfield was anxious to have avoided. As for George's flirtations with Mary Donne, he troubled himself little: he held the member in the hollow of his hand, and could knead him into whatever form he pleased.

It was not, however, without much reflection and a careful arrangement of all the arguments that might have to be brought to bear upon his son, that he ventured to approach the subject of marriage to Harold. The two were in the library, whither Lord Earlsfield had carried his son to see the plans of some new machinery which had been proposed for one of the Earlsfield coal-pits. For once Harold was interested. He carefully examined the plans, made calculations, took a pencil and paper and made a sketch showing his father how by a very simple alteration the machine could be made to work with more power and less expenditure of force;

and Lord Earlsfield with delight had promised at once that his idea should be carried out, and that they should go together to see the machinery tried.

"You see what a help you could be to me," said Lord Earlsfield, laying his hands upon Harold's shoulders. "I am getting an old man now, and the weight of business will soon get irksome to me; but I shall have you to rely upon to take my place, when you have applied yourself a little more closely to the mastery of details."

"I am sure I would be very glad to do anything to help you, sir," returned his son, "but I am afraid I have very little head for management. I never could understand accounts, and my tastes have never been inclined to money-making."

"Wait till you have to do with money-spending, my boy," said Lord Earlsfield, pleasantly. "You have always as yet had whatever you required, and have never had to consider where it came from, and how it was got; but when you become chancellor of the exchequer, and have to study both sides of the budget, and how to make the revenue balance with the expenditure, you will have to take an interest in the matter, *nolens volens*."

Harold sighed. "Well, at all events I hope it will be long before such a burden falls upon me."

"Well, I hope so too," said his father, also with a sigh; "but, as I said, I am getting old, and I think I could die cheerfully if I saw you happily married and settled, and able to fill my place."

Harold coloured violently and became very agitated. "Did you say married, sir?" he said after a little pause; "do you really think that I might marry?"

"Think you might marry!" re-echoed his father; "why, of course you might marry—must marry, in fact. What is to become of the title if you don't? George would ruin the Earlsfield estates in twelve months' time."

"I have thought of marriage," answered Harold with a flushed face, and speaking very deliberately. "I have very often thought of it, and doubted whether I ever ought to marry."

"Why, what could have put such an idea into your head?" cried Lord Earlsfield, with great appearance of heartiness, but with a sinking feeling at heart.

"Why, sir, you know well that I am not —that I have not been as other people are."

"My dear, dear Harold," said his father, taking him in his arms, "do not let such thoughts distress you. You must not brood over past temporary ailments. That is all gone now, and never was anything to speak of. Mere delicacy of constitution—nothing more—nothing congenital. I have the best medical authority for saying so. You are over all that now, and there is not the remotest chance of your again suffering in the same way."

"I wish I could think so, sir," replied

Harold; "but I thought my mother's family——"

"Not a word of truth in it," interrupted Lord Earlsfield promptly. He felt that he had himself forsaken the paths of truth, and was resolved to make the most of his transgression. "Not a word of truth in it. The Beechboroughs were all eccentric — prided themselves on being so. But there never was a clearer-headed or a stronger-minded woman than your poor dear mother."

"I have often thought that if there really was anything constitutionally wrong with me," said Harold, sadly, "it would be a great crime of me to think of marriage,—to run the risk of making a woman's life unhappy,—to be the father perhaps of lunatics or imbeciles."

"My dear boy," cried Lord Earlsfield, "pray dismiss all such morbid nonsense from your mind. Do you think if there were the possibility of such a risk, I would speak to you as I am doing? Of course I have carefully satisfied myself upon the point—have consulted the best authorities—and I assure you that there is no earthly reason why you should not be married to-morrow if the lady were only selected."

"There need be no such hurry," said Harold, with a brightening face; "but it is very kind of you, father, to have spoken to me as you have done. You have taken a load off my mind, for one does not like not to be as other people."

"Well, then," said his father, "you must look about you. Now, if I were a young man again, there is no one I would be so much tempted to fall in love with as Miss Donne. A charming girl, and as good as she is beautiful. And highly intellectual too. She has been shut up here ever since she left school, but if she were to go into society, she would have a score of offers in a week. Now, if you could find me a daughter-in-law like Mary Donne, my consent would not be difficult to gain."

"I must think over my newly found freedom in the abstract, before realising it by an application in the concrete," replied Harold, lightly.

"Well, you will find few like Mary Donne wherever you look," persisted his father.

"I know that, sir,—she is as good as you have said she is," said Harold, somewhat evasively.

"Well, then, go and see if you can find her, and exercise your fascinations on her, and leave me to these accounts which you despise," concluded Lord Earlsfield in hearty good-humour, "and let me hear no more of morbid and absurd fancies." And Harold gladly beat a retreat.

Left to himself, Lord Earlsfield relapsed from the appearance of light-heartedness which he had assumed when he was talking to his son. "A woman's life unhappy," and "the father of lunatics or imbeciles," sounded in his ears with an accusing echo. What if these words should come true? Harold had said it would be a crime. If so, the crime would rest on his shoulders; for though he fondly hoped that Harold's malady would give him immunity in the future, all the weight of the medical evidence, which he had carefully consulted, was against such a supposition. He had deceived his son, and the guilt of any possible disaster lay at his door. And Mary Donne, was he criminally sacrificing her life and happiness? For a moment Lord Earlsfield felt horror-struck at the possible disasters which crowded upon his imagination, and he felt disposed to abandon his plans to the wind. He kept a conscience, but it was a well-disciplined one, and his conduct had been shaped so much by form and rule that it was rarely necessary to have recourse to its arbitrament. For a moment he wavered, but then there arose a vision of his son, mad and uncared for, immured perhaps in a lunatic asylum; George, and perhaps his brother James, revelling in Earlscourt with all sorts of disreputable and disorderly companions; the estates wasted; the name of Earlsfield dragged through the dirt. And then he thought of Mary Donne as the one good angel who could prevent such a catastrophe; who could tend with devotedness her helpless husband; who could maintain order and preserve their honour: and this last vision settled his resolution. With a pale and drawn face, as if of one suffering from severe pain, Lord Earlsfield sat down to his table, and began to busy himself with work.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

A PROPOSAL.

Dr Sparshott was in a very bad humour—a humour compounded of trouble, annoyance, petty irritation, and misanthropy in general. He was struggling to concentrate his attention upon the "end buds" of Elasmobranchs, on which interesting subject he was penning an elaborate paper, which was to give to the scientific world a perfectly new theory of the sensory structure of that respected section of the piscatorial family. But though he carped at every one who had previously written upon the subject, though he cavilled at their facts and sneered at their conclusions, little mental relief came to him from this outpouring. He mixed his notes into inextricable confusion; he lost the pages which he had to consult in the battery of books of reference piled up on the floor beside his chair; and, worst of all, a certain blue letter lying on his desk would come between his attention and the Elasmobranchs. This was an intimation from the Metropolitan and Rural Bank reminding him that his acceptance to Mr John Spung for thirty pounds sterling was three days overdue, and a request that the note might be taken up at once to avoid protestation. It was easy enough for the bank to tell him to take it up, but how was the Doctor to do it? This was the problem that would keep obtruding itself into his efforts to build up a new theory of Elasmobranchic sensation, and no vituperation of his fellow-workers in deep waters, no expenditure of temper or inward swearing, would eliminate it from his mind.

As if this was not enough, Mr Wynes his assistant put his head in at the door of the little den which was the one corner of the Museum sacred to Dr Sparshott's privacy, with, "If you please, sir, Alderman Kyle is in the Museum with a party of ladies, and could you come round with them?" The Doctor assigned the Alderman, ladies, and all a very disagreeable doom, which made his mild assistant shudder, and look nervously round his shoulder in case the visitors might be within earshot. "Tell them I'm busy," growled the Doctor, "infernally busy, and show them over yourself;" and he seized his pen again and made another assault upon the Elasmobranchs. But again a tap came to the door, and before the Doctor could hurl a malediction at the intruder, Harold Colpoys appeared in the entrance. The Doctor's face cleared. He liked the young man, who knew enough of science to sympathise with and appreciate his pursuits, and who was such an attentive and intelligent listener to his expositions. Besides, he would some day be Lord Earlsfield, and the Doctor had even dreamed of an increased Museum and an enlarged salary, and even of grants for special research obtained through the influence of this disciple who would be a potentate both in the county and the borough. So his brow cleared and he gave the new-comer a kindly greeting, and cleared a litter of books and papers from the only other chair in the room.

"It is a shame to disturb you, Doctor, I know," said Harold, sitting down and nervously playing with his gloves. "I am sure you are awfully busy, but in fact there is something important I have to tell you—something important to me, that is — and something to ask you too."

"Ah, I know," said the Doctor, sympathetically; "your experiments on the acetylation of cellulose have broken down. You may remember that I expressed a doubt whether you were taking the right plan. Now what I would do is——"

"No, no, Doctor, it is not that," interrupted Harold—"it isn't that. In fact, I have been

—well, I have not done anything more to that. It is quite another thing I wanted to speak about—a purely personal matter to myself."

"Oh," said the Doctor, sitting back in his chair in resigned expectancy, for his imagination could carry him no further, and his eye again caught sight of that ominous blue envelope. "Would this young man lend him the money?" he wondered—"could he?"

"You see, Doctor," resumed Harold, getting still more nervous, "ever since I came home I have enjoyed coming to the Museum above all other places, thanks to the great kindness you have shown me—and Miss Sparshott too," he added, with a gulp.

"There can be no harm in asking him," said the Doctor to himself. "Thirty pounds can't be much to him—if he has got it."

"My father, too," the ingenuous youth continued to ramble, "is anxious that I should get settled. He has spoken to me about it —and—and I want to marry Miss Sparshott, Doctor. I am deeply, most deeply in love with her."

The Doctor's lower jaw fell with sheer astonishment. He looked helplessly from Harold Colpoys to the blue envelope, and then at a drawing showing the nervous system of an Elasmobranch, as if his senses had been mislaid either upon the one or the other. "Eh?" was all that he was able to ejaculate, as he at last with an obvious effort turned his glance once more upon Harold.

"I love Miss Sparshott, Doctor," repeated Harold, a little impatiently. "I want to marry her if she will have me. I hope you won't object, and that you will give me your good word."

"But, Lord bless my soul! she is only a child," ejaculated the Doctor—"too young, far too young, for that kind of thing."

"Only a year younger than I am," corrected Harold, "and many ladies are married three years sooner than she would be."

"Bless my soul!" again ejaculated the

Doctor, "let me see. She was born the year I wrote my paper on the fossil reptiles of the Karoo Beds. I remember I wanted to call her Karoo, but her mother objected. I was at Cape Town, and that is twenty years ago. Why, the child must be a woman!" and this unexpected discovery plunged the Doctor into still greater haziness than before.

"Well, but, Doctor, what do you say?" urged Harold, knowing the difficulty in keeping his interlocutor to the point. "I know I am not good enough for her, but the whole aim of my life will be to make her happy."

Again the Doctor strove to grasp the situation, but so many thoughts were struggling and fighting together to make the first impression on his sensorium, that nothing definite came of his cogitations. Again his eye lit upon the blue envelope, and thence came a gleam of intelligence. Lord Earlsfield's son must be rich; if he was going to marry Cloete, he would of course pay those thirty pounds; perhaps more might be got out of him: and the Doctor's mind already saw himself in possession of a number of coveted treatises which he had wanted badly, and which a little ago had lain far outside the scope of his hopes. Certainly he might marry Cloete, and a good thing too, the Doctor at last said to himself.

"What does Cloete say?" he asked at length.

"I have not spoken to her yet," answered Harold, somewhat surprised at the question.

"Then why the devil did you come to me?" snapped the Doctor testily, as he recollected that his girl had a mind of her own which did not always run in the same groove as his convenience. "I can't do anything in the matter. It isn't me you want to marry."

"I thought I ought in honour to speak to you first," replied the other, "to be sure that you had no objection, before I spoke to Miss Sparshott. May I assure myself, if I am happy enough to obtain Miss Sparshott's consent, you will raise no obstacles?"

"I! no, certainly not—I see no reason to do so," returned the Doctor. "You can maintain a wife, of course, and that is all that has to be looked to if both you and she are pleased. Go and speak to her yourself, and when you have done, come back to me and I will give you a better formula for your acetylation. I felt sure your own would break down."

Harold went up-stairs a good deal perturbed by this interview. It had not turned out in any way as he had previously thought it would. He had expected that the Doctor would go very seriously into the subject; that he would inquire about Lord Earlsfield's views, and want to be assured that he would receive Cloete as a member of his family; that, worst of all, he might raise objections on the score of Harold's own malady. All this the young man had thought over beforehand, and though it was a relief to have escaped with so little trouble, he did not feel altogether satisfied in his mind that the business had been properly gone through—that the Doctor had sufficiently grasped how vitally important the matter was, both to his daughter and to Harold himself.

Still, the result was satisfactory so far as he had gone, and if he succeeded as well with Cloete herself, the victory would be with him. He tried to recall, as he went up-stairs to the Doctor's private rooms, every mark of encouragement that he had received from her,—her kindness, her frank confidence, her evident pleasure when he called upon her. When all was put together it was not much, but there was enough to afford hope to an ardent and uncalculating mind. Not that Harold thought himself uncalculating; on the contrary, he had long and thoughtfully matured his plan of campaign, had armed himself with every argument that could plead his cause, and anticipated every possible objection by a suitable answer. To do him justice, he thought little enough of the advantages of birth and rank in the abstract, but even these he was prepared to press if his suit needed them. He had meant to impress the Doctor with these, but the *savant* had not required them, and Harold was thankful. But Cloete was a woman, was young, impressionable, and perhaps ambitious. Surely the Earlsfield coronet must count for something, and Harold was prepared to lay it at her feet.

But he was quite pale and agitated as he tapped at the door of the Doctor's parlour, and waited until the soft low voice, that seemed to him to contain the essence of all music, languidly bade him "come in."

Cloete was sitting at a table dreamily colouring some mysterious-looking diagrams, probably cross-sections of Elasmobranchs, according to the Doctor's directions, and she rose with a sigh of relief and extended a cordial hand of welcome, saying—

"Ah, Mr Colpoys, you have come to see papa, and to have some tea, I hope. We have been waiting for him this past half-hour. He is particularly busy, which also means being particularly cross, and drove away Mary with indignity when she went to call him. But I shall send to tell him that you are here, and that will be sure to make him more amenable."

She moved towards the bell, but Harold quickly placed himself in her way, and with unsteady voice said hurriedly—

"Stay, Miss Sparshott—I have seen the Doctor. I wish to speak to you very particularly before you send for him."

Cloete paused and looked at him: only then was she aware of the agitation of his manner, and his flushed face and sparkling eyes. The thought flashed across her, could the Doctor have applied to Harold for money to meet that thirty-pound bill that was vexing him? Yet another humiliation, she thought with a sigh. But still, anything was better than having to go back to Stephen Brancepeth. So she sat down with a heightened colour, and waited to hear what was to come next.

Harold Colpoys leaned his elbow on the mantelpiece and stood looking down upon her, while he made an obvious effort to master his nervousness.

"It is about myself I want to speak," he said, "and—and about you. Ever since I came back, my only happiness has been to be with you—to see you, to hear your voice. Oh, Miss Sparshott, dearest Cloete," he pleaded, clasping his hands and looking down into her face, "I cannot tell how I love you; but I love you, I do love you!"

Cloete was so startled by this sudden declaration as to doubt if she had heard aright; but the earnest passion of his last words brought her quickly to her senses.

"No, no, Mr Colpoys, you cannot say that, you must not say that to me!" she cried. "You cannot, you must not love—*me!*"

She hardly knew what she was saying, and had sprung to her feet in her perturbation, and had stretched out one arm towards him half repellently, half entreatingly. A great flow of pity came over her as she marked how he almost staggered at her words, and leaned heavily against the mantelpiece.

"But hear me, Cloete," he urged, his confidence increasing as he noticed the girl's agitation. "Do not condemn me without hearing what I have to say. I have never loved before—never dreamed of love until I saw you, and then all at once you took possession of my whole heart, my life, my soul—and without you everything is blank. And, Cloete, if you would only give me a little of your love, if you would only give me one spark of hope, I——"

"Mr Colpoys," interrupted Cloete, "I cannot allow you to go on. It would be unfair to yourself. I will not insult you by saying that I hope you are not in earnest, for I see you are in earnest, and I am very, very sorry; but, dear Mr Colpoys, forgive me for saying that it could never be—I could never love you."

"You could never love *me?*" he repeated, inquiringly; and he paused a minute in thought. Then a black frown came over his face, his throat quivered, and his limbs twitched. She had heard, then, of his malady. His fate was again thwarting him, and dooming him to misery. He passed his hand over his forehead as if to see if he could feel there the inscription of the curse which hung upon him.

"They have told you, then," he said, gloomily, "that I am mad, that I have been mad, and may become mad again—and—and you are afraid of me."

The look of despair on his face, the tortured eyes, the agonised clasping and unclasping of his hands, touched the girl's heart, and brought her whole feminine sympathy into play.

"It is not true," she said, laying her hand with soft tenderness upon his shoulder, and bending her eyes almost melting to tears full upon his. Her agitation was now gone, and the superiority of deep sympathy had made her thoroughly mistress of the situation. "I do not believe what you say," she said, fearlessly; "and if I did, and could love you, it would not prevent me from standing by you."

"Then, Cloete——" he urged, but the girl again broke in.

"Hear me to the end. You have done me a great honour—the greatest a man can offer to a woman; and liking and respecting you as I do, I am proud of it. And you are entitled to know why I cannot accept it. I have loved once, and can never love again."

"But that is over and gone," urged Harold. "If your heart is now free you may love again—you may yet love me. Do not dismiss me to despair all at once. I have startled you by my suddenness. Think over it; give me a chance."

"No," replied Cloete, firmly, "my heart is not free. I suppose I ought to be ashamed to say so now, but I owe you the truth. It is because I still love, and will continue to love, that I shall never be able to love another. And now, Mr Colpoys, that I have confessed my secret, be generous to me. Spare me, spare yourself further pain by speaking more of this. Let us just be as we were before, and I shall always esteem and value your friendship."

Harold Colpoys shook his head. He felt a deep gloom settling down over his mind, paralysing alike thought and feeling—a gloom which shut out the future and almost obscured the present. A maddening anger was beginning to rage within him, at what or against whom he did not clearly know. Mechanically, with dazed eyes, he almost staggered towards the door, but his hands refused to find the latch.

Cloete sprang after him. "You will not go thus, Mr Colpoys," she said, pleadingly. "You will forgive me if I have made you unhappy, and oh! I am so sorry that it should be so!"

"Yes, I will shake hands," he said absently, and turning round fixed an intent glassy look upon her face, which made Cloete shiver. The next minute he had her hand to his lips, impressed one deep fervent kiss upon it, and was gone. In the Museum corridor he would have passed the Doctor unobserved, although the latter with his arms full of folios nearly ran into him.

"Eh?" cried the Doctor. "I have just been to fetch the 'Histoire Naturelle des Poissons,'—not that there is much in *that*, though; but sometimes one gets a hint from the older books. The older naturalists were timorous, sir, and when they saw a new theory dimly they were as frightened as if they had seen a ghost. But ah! let me see. What was it? Oh yes, what did Cloete say?"

Harold shook his head, and with difficulty repressed a groan.

"It is that damned Brancepeth," growled the Doctor, viciously clapping Cuvier against Valenciennes, raising a cloud of ancient dust which covered Harold's precipitate flight down the stair. "But ho!" he cried; "won't you take that formula away with you for your acetylation of cellulose?" But no answer was returned.

Harold Colpoys went out to the street, scarcely knowing where he was or whither he was going in his blindness. He did see that his aunt Dorothy had driven past, and that he had turned his back upon the signals which she made to him to join her. Unconsciously he took the opposite way to Earlscourt, and descended the slope towards the harbour. Gradually there was rising out of the chaos of his ruined hopes a definite sense of injury—that he had been deceived, wronged, betrayed, he did not see clearly how or by whom. But amid the surging tumults of his thoughts two feelings began to master him—a sense of injury, a desire for revenge.

"That damned Brancepeth," he muttered to himself, quoting the Doctor. "Ay, it is him assuredly—and she, she——"

While he had been with Cloete, even while she was rejecting his prayer, his love and reverence for her had kept all other feelings in the background. But now that he was away from her presence, he found to his horror that his love was changing to an intense hate. It was she who was the prime cause of his misery; she who had encouraged him into loving her, she who had spurned his offer—the heir to the Earlsfield peerage. In Harold's distracted mind her offence became a crime — a crime that she must expiate. But how? "That devil Brancepeth" should never, at all events, enjoy one who had been denied to himself. He stamped his foot and glared wildly about him, unconscious of the attentions of the passers-by. And then there suddenly flashed across his mind the recollection of previous states of mental excitement, followed by days and months of suffering, mental torture, and bodily restraint. He knew the symptoms too well by previous experience. "God help me! I am going mad again!" he ejaculated. He had now reached the head of the quay, and an empty cab was standing at the door of a public-house. He had just strength to call the driver to order him to go to Earlscourt, and to throw himself back in the cab with a desperate resolution to dismiss all thoughts except that of fighting against the impending malady.

"Is it possible that you have rejected young Colpoys?" asked Dr Sparshott the same evening, when, his studies finished, he came up-stairs to smoke a pipe in his parlour before retiring to rest.

"Yes, father," replied Cloete, saddening at the recollection of the pain she had inflicted.

"And why, may I ask?" demanded the Doctor tartly, determined for once to read her a lecture in the spirit of worldly wisdom, in revenge for the many homilies of the same kind which force compelled the girl to pour into his unwilling ears.

"Why, father, don't you know that he is not—have you not heard that he has fits of madness?" adroitly replied the daughter, using the argument which, of all others, would tell most with her parent.

"So he has! bless my soul, I had quite forgotten! I might have told him that it would never do, if I had only remembered about it. Be always sure to avoid either physical or mental defects in husbands, Cloete. Remember that 'like tends to beget like,' and though a generation may escape, 'atavism' always may be expected to crop up. When any one wants to marry you, send them to me, and I will carefully go into the subject."

"You stupid father, don't you see that nobody is likely to want to marry me unless they are cracked? and so you will have me always with you to tease you and look after you, and colour these senseless diagrams of yours, which you have never once looked at, although I am sure they are all wrong." And she first smoothed his hair and then ruffled it, and finally gave him a kiss and went to her room, leaving the Doctor to think over the newly discovered problem that he had a daughter who had come to a marriageable age—a subject involving questions as weighty as any of those relating to the Elasmobranchs.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

A CRISIS.

Lord Earlsfield was so accustomed to play the part of Providence or Fate that he took but little account of the fact that there seemed to be no progress in the direction of his cherished plans. If he did anything himself, he felt sure that it was rightly done, and claimed a decent credit and satisfaction in the achievement. If his ends were compassed without any exertion on his part, he duly recognised the natural fitness of things, and generally noted some respects in which matters would have been improved by his personal intervention. So he was not at all disconcerted that there seemed to be no approach to an understanding between Harold and Mary Donne, but carried on his plans as if their marriage was an assured or early event. The matter had lately occupied all Lord Earlsfield's spare time that he could devote from the business of his property; and his arrangements were in a very advanced stage. The wedding, the honeymoon, the future residence of the bride and bridegroom, the alterations to be made in Earlscourt for their accommodation, the allowance to be settled upon them during his own lifetime, had all been carefully thought out and noted down in black and white in Lord Earlsfield's private memoranda. He had even got so far as to consider the prospective condition of an heir, and other children, which suggested many issues requiring the decision of a nice judgment such as Lord Earlsfield felt he could supply. It was an exceptional thing for the heir to the Earlsfield peerage to marry during his father's life, and there were no precedents to fall back upon as to provision for the third generation. But this was altogether an exceptional arrangement, and Lord Earlsfield resolved that the marriage settlements should make distinct and liberal provision for Harold's eldest son, and that the upbringing and education of the child should be his own particular care; for Lord Earlsfield laid count with a long life, saving accidents, and calculated upon being able to see his son's son at least launched into public life.

"It seems all plain and straightforward enough," mused his lordship, as he sat in the library complacently regarding the notes in which he had jotted down these ideas; "and now all that we want is to make a start. I must get a date fixed for the marriage. I must speak to Harold again. I must show him that as there is a moot understanding that he is to marry Mary Donne, he is acting very wrongly and unfeelingly in trifling with her any longer—that should be a pretty strong argument; and I shall tell him, too, how much I have set my heart on the marriage, and how bitterly I should be disappointed if my plans for his happiness were in any way to fall through. Yes, he must yield to reason, and I shall bring him round as gently and judiciously as possible. And Mary—well, I may calculate on her obedience. I can see that she will never venture to oppose me. It would be ingratitude—it would——" and as his eye caught the portrait of Colonel Donne on the wall he could not help wincing. "Yes," he endeavoured to reassure himself; "her settlements shall be as liberal as if she were a duke's daughter bringing a large dowry into the family. I think I shall give Fossebraye a hint at once as to what is coming on, and get him to make a draft for the settlements. The sight of them may influence her, although she is not mercenary—no, Mary is not mercenary," he added, with a half sigh; "it is to her respect and gratitude to myself that I must appeal."

Lord Earlsfield was indulging in very Machiavelli-like complacency over his policy, when a rap came to the library door, and George Colpoys entered almost before he had been invited. Lord Earlsfield looked up with a frown, for he did not like to be intruded upon in the library, and George's voluntary visits to that apartment were so invariably associated with requests for money, that his lordship clearly divined what was coming.

"So you are back again," he observed, rather gruffly. "You haven't stayed long in town. What took you there?"

"Parliamentary business," answered George, carelessly; "had to see Elliott—one of our Whips, you know."

"I don't wonder at their grumbling at your absence," replied Lord Earlsfield, with becoming severity. "The Government seems to be getting tightly wedged in in the Lower House. Every vote must be of use; and how on earth you can manage to stay away a whole session under plea of ill health—perfectly preposterous!"

"Well, I have got disease of the chest,

anyhow, as Theodore Hook, or Charles Lamb, or some of these fellows, puts it," replied George, with emphasis.

"That disease is chronic with you," tartly replied his brother; "if it would have yielded to treatment, you would have been cured of that long ago."

"I inherit the complaint," retorted George, mildly; "it has always run in the younger members of our family. Dora is the only one who has been lucky enough to escape it."

Lord Earlsfield merely said "Hum," and showed no disposition to continue the subject.

"However, I shall have to go back to town very soon," said George. "I had a long talk with Elliott, and find that I must arrange to go up at once."

"Well?" queried Lord Earlsfield, with provoking indifference.

"Well," replied George, doggedly, "the long and the short of it is, that I can't go without money. If you would not mind my anticipating my next quarter's allowance——"

"I think you have anticipated five—no, six quarters already," remarked Lord Earlsfield, referring to a russia-bound book, which he had taken care to see handily placed soon after George had made his appearance.

"Possibly," returned George, doggedly, "but there we are. It is useless to speak of my going back to town without money."

Lord Earlsfield was thoughtful for a minute. "Well," he said at length, "for several reasons you are quite right in going back to town, and staying there for some time. I may as well tell you that I am going to have Harold's and Mary Donne's marriage brought off at once, and I think you had better keep away until the affair comes off. Of course I have noticed that you have been amusing yourself by philandering with Miss Donne—no, you needn't interrupt me: of course I know quite well that there could be nothing serious between you on either side; but still, for the sake of propriety, as the lady will soon be your niece, there should be a stop to such silly gallantry, and I am not indisposed to provide an escape for you."

George felt some difficulty in repressing a grimace at this oration, but prudently held his peace.

"And as I wish to mark my sense of the importance of my son's marriage, I shall not be so strict upon this occasion as I should be under other circumstances. You shall have another quarter's income, and shall go back to London at once; and perhaps it will be as well for you not to come back again until you come for the marriage."

"I certainly shall be in no hurry to come back," quoth George, grimly.

"You are quite right," said his lordship, blandly; "I hope you will make up for your absence during the remainder of the session. You will always have a chance of getting in a word upon Supply. Let me know when you start—and if I were you, I would not lose time—and I shall see that you are provided with funds."

"He wants to get me out of the way," George shortly after told Mary, "so that my philandering, as he calls it, will not interfere with Harold's running. And I'm to have a quarter's allowance graciously accorded to me. Well, my darling, that will come nicely handy for our honeymoon, and keep us off the Jews until we see the colour of her Majesty's money. I must try Dora too, and see if I can't levy a contribution from her."

"You will do nothing of the sort," said Mary, with a positive stamp of her little foot; "you are to give up all that kind of thing, and learn to live, ay, and to save money, on your salary. It is bad enough to have to cheat them all in this fashion, but I will have no more money levied under false pretences. You would not have me ashamed of you, George?"

"No, dearest, not for all the millions

in the Mint; but what is a poor devil to do?"

"To do as I tell you—and that will be to do what is right," said Mary, shaking her forefinger with pulpit emphasis.

"You little de—darling, have you begun to rule me already?" cried George, endeavouring to take her in his arms, which she skilfully evaded; "but never mind, Mary, I am your slave, and you shall flog and pickle me if you like. And now you have got to hold yourself in readiness—light marching order, mind; and we shall start as soon as my appointment is signed. Elliott is to wire, and I have everything perfect, a special licence in my pocket, and a parson to marry us at two hours' notice."

Mary sighed, "I wish it could have been done any other way. I hate anything clandestine, and I am sure that Lord Earlsfield will think me so ungrateful."

"To be sure he will," cried George, triumphantly; "he considers that all creation was made to further his own ends, and it is a bad look-out for creation if it does not endeavour to further the object of its being. He will never forgive either of us; but that mustn't vex us. You must look your last at the Court, Mary mine, for neither you nor I are likely to see the inside of it again, unless you come back as Lady Earlsfield. And yet, bad as they make me out to be, I wish Earlsfield may live for a thousand years, and Harold too for that matter—as long as he hasn't got you, my darling."

And here their conference was interrupted by Mrs Firebrace, who came along the corridor where they were standing, and who regarded their presence with evident disfavour and a suspicious sniff.

"Ah, Hetty, here you are!" cried George, whose high spirits could not be kept under; "I have just been discussing a future state with Miss Donne. I was telling her of a clerical friend of mine in York whose views on the subject I am very anxious she should hear."

"Hem!" replied Mrs Firebrace, doubtfully; "I am glad to think that you sometimes turn your thoughts to precious subjects. Life is but a span and eternity is infinite—especially an eternity of torments. I shall give you a precious book on 'The Destiny of the Lost,' my dear," turning to Mary; but Mary was gone—had already disappeared in the recesses of her own apartments. "Ah, as I feared, too many thorns for the seed; and as for you, George"—here she turned to him, but George was already gone, and nothing visible except his back at the extreme end of the corridor. Mrs Firebrace gave utterance to a triumphant groan, and muttering something about the "wrath to come," went on her way.

On his return home after his interview with Cloete Sparshott, Harold had gone straight to his own room, and had excused himself from appearing at dinner on the plea of a headache. There was a bitter struggle before him. He knew that upon his keeping himself perfectly quiet, and avoiding all irritating and annoying thoughts, depended his being able to stave off one of those recurring fits of insanity which, when they had passed over him, left him a wreck both in mind and body. His man Peters had been long with him, and knew perfectly well what to do under the circumstances. He announced that his master had overworked himself at his studies, and was not to be disturbed ; and even Lord Earlsfield, who came in in an agony of concern, was denied admittance, and assured there was nothing to be frightened about.

But in spite of opiates, that reposeful condition of mind which was so necessary to avert frenzy would not come. Harold strove to read, to write, to engage his mind anyhow or anyway ; but still the black cloud seemed ever to settle closer and closer over his intellect, and out of it to come lightning-flashes, which served only to illuminate the road to revenge. Under its pressure his whole nature became transformed to the fierceness of a wild beast, and destruction was the only aim and gratification which could soothe by anticipation. Yet he was so far master of himself that he could distinguish in himself a dual identity,—a Harold Colpoys with a better nature, struggling for self-command; a Harold—no, a devil planning fiendish thoughts and infernal schemes of retribution. Which of the two, he asked himself with a hollow laugh that rang of despair, was to get the better of the other? And there was ever present, too, the feeling that he must dissimulate—that he must hide even from Peters. How ill he was—how terrible were the ideas revolving in his brain! Harold had been more than once under restraint in former days, and he must evade coercion this time. He had a feeling that he had something to do—what, he did not know; but it was something terrible—something that, with hard, resistless force, was dragging him onwards—to do what? A cold shudder shook the whole of his frame, his eyes rolled as if he saw his doom in front of him. But again he recovered, with an effort of determination that almost exhausted his force, and rang the bell for Peters.

"Give me some more of that draught, Peters," he said; "I feel quite done up, and shall lie down on this sofa, and see if I can sleep a while."

"You are taking rather much, Mr Harold," said the man, looking critically at the medicine bottle; "but if you lie down and settle yourself to sleep, it will do you good."

He threw a fur rug over Harold, and tucked him up, and went outside, carefully leaving his own door ajar that he might hear the least noise from his master's room. Peters was a man of judgment, and experienced in his master's maladies, and had been long enough with him to feel keenly sympathetic and attached to the young man. The opiate mounted to Harold's brain, but did not deaden the acute pain that was there. Was he sleeping? was he dreaming? He did not know. But there, flitting about him, was Brancepeth —"that damned Brancepeth," he kept repeating to himself—and Cloete Sparshott, and, strange to say, his aunt Dorothy. What did they want? Why had they come to torment him? They were burning his brain with red-hot irons, and he was powerless to drive them off—could stir neither hand nor foot. But soon he would be better—then he would be revenged upon them all, especially upon Cloete Sparshott. Yes, it was she who was the cause of all the evil; had it not been for her he would not have been thus tortured. It was she who was inflicting the severest pain upon him—her irons were hotter than the others—and it was she who was urging on the other two and showing them where they could do him most injury. He tried to raise his hand to strike her as she hovered about his couch, but she touched his arm and it was paralysed. All he could do was to lie there, and grind his teeth, and bear it, and wait—wait. When Peters looked softly into the room, he seemed asleep, and his heavy breathing told of disturbed visions; so the man lowered the lamp, adjusted the rug about his master, and went out, this time locking the door gently behind him. As he was going into his room Lord Earlsfield came along the corridor.

"How is he now?" he inquired in a low voice.

"Asleep, my lord," replied the man. "He has got an opiate which ought to give him next eight hours' sleep certain."

"And do you think he will be better when he awakes?"

"I trust so, my lord. Sleep is the best thing for him. But I can't think what has come over him. You do not know of anything he has had to worry him, my lord?"

"N—no," said Lord Earlsfield, doubtfully, as the thought that what he had said to Harold about marriage might have given him a shock; but no, that was a week ago, and Harold had been quite easy and in excellent spirits since that time. "No, I know of nothing," he said, positively.

"Looks much as if——" said Peters, indefinitely.

"Take care, Peters, that this is kept very quiet," said Lord Earlsfield, impressively. "If you are asked about it, he has got a bad cold and is a little feverish." "It would never do for Mary to hear of this," he muttered, as he turned away.

CHAPTER XL.

PLAYING WITH FIRE.

BRANCEPETH, with the assistance of young Briggs, had devoted himself to an investigation of Dr Sparshott's pecuniary obligations, and had succeeded in paying off all the numerous small loans that were likely to press him. Mr Briggs's investigations soon made it apparent that "Spicey" Spung was the only man who had been confiding enough to discount the Doctor's paper; and Mr Spung being brought to account, and severely jammed up in a corner, was compelled to admit that he had no interest in the Doctor whatever, and wouldn't lend him a sixpence himself on his own risk, "no, not on no account."

He admitted that he was acting for another party; but neither the cajoleries of Briggs, nor the unlimited threepenny-worths of rum which the liberal agent regaled him with, debiting the same to his master under the head of "miscellaneous charges," could extract from him the name of this benevolent Samaritan, who did not choose to let his lights shine before men. Even when brought up to the bank, and interrogated sharply by Mr Stephen himself, Spung declared that his honour would not allow him to betray his trust; and when shown that it would be made worth his while, his conscience proved superior to any proffer less than a "fiver." Fingering the note, Mr Spung then confessed that he had advanced money to the Doctor at the instigation and at the risk of Mr Mold, and that there was a bill for thirty pounds now due at the Metropolitan and Rural Bank, Mr Mold having given orders that no more of the Doctor's paper was to be presented through Brancepeth Brothers.

Stephen Brancepeth had little difficulty in solving the mystery of Mr Mold's benevolence. He had long noticed the lawyer's hankering after Cloete Sparshott; and as he took his hat with the intention of walking along to Fossebraye & Mold's, it was with a lofty intention to expose and confound his machinations, to which a *quasi* dog-in-the-manger feeling with regard to the fair object of their mutual interest added a good deal of temper. "Look here, Mr Mold," he said abruptly, when he was shown into the lawyer's room, "I have undertaken to look into Dr Sparshott's affairs, and I want just a word with you."

"I trust there is nothing wrong with the Doctor?" inquired Mr Mold, blandly.

"Nothing worse than usual; but some bills of his have come under my notice in the ordinary way of business, and I have promised to see what I can do to get matters put straight for him."

"Very considerate, very liberal indeed," rejoined Mr Mold suavely, rubbing his hands.

"And I find that you are his principal, in fact his only creditor, for money advanced to him through a man Spung."

"Ah," returned Mr Mold, gently; "is that so?"

"That is so; and now I have to ask you for a memorandum of the Doctor's liability to you, and that you will also oblige me by not advancing the Doctor more money through this man Spung."

"You are acting——?" queried Mr Mold, with polite interrogation in his tones.

"In behalf of Dr Sparshott, yes," replied Brancepeth, evasively.

"And by his instructions?" Mr Mold was increasing in mildness.

"No; I can't say that. You know enough of the Doctor to be aware that he has got no head for business, and will not attend to its requirements, and that all his difficulties fall upon his daughter's shoulders."

"His daughter—yes, to be sure. And you are acting for Miss Sparshott?"

"You may consider my position to be such. Miss Sparshott was compelled to come to us about her father's affairs, and I have undertaken to get them settled."

"Very kind of you, very much so indeed, quite benevolent. Miss Sparshott is to be congratulated on having secured so able and liberal a financial adviser. It does one good to meet with such disinterestedness in this hard age—it does indeed, Mr Brancepeth."

"I can return the compliment with interest, Mr Mold. There are very few men who would have shown the same liberality towards the Doctor, and with so much delicacy too, keeping yourself entirely in the background."

"Ah," said Mr Mold, with a smile, "it would never have done for the Doctor to have known where the money came from. He would have drawn upon me like a bank. Besides, one naturally feels a delicacy in helping people in their position."

"A delicacy that does you credit, Mr Mold," returned Brancepeth, who, seeing that there was no opportunity of having it out with the lawyer, was impatient to be off; "but I trust you will not encourage the Doctor to go any further."

"There will be no occasion, Mr Brancepeth—no occasion. When you have taken Miss Sparshott up, there will be no need for any trifling assistance from me in future."

"You will understand, Mr Mold," said Brancepeth, severely, "that I am acting in this affair purely in a business way—in a matter which came before me in the course of my usual work in the bank."

"I understand perfectly, Mr Brancepeth; of course I could never imagine any except formal relations to exist between you and Miss Sparshott since your marriage."

Stephen started slightly, but Mr Mold's face was all indifferent placidity, and his eyes were rolling in their usual eccentric orbits without any sign of expression.

"In that case there can be no misunderstanding," he said as he left. "How has *he* found out, next?" he muttered to himself as he descended the stairs. "It seems to me that my marriage is an open secret, and that I am the only one who is not permitted to own it. Well, I don't care. The sooner the explosion comes the better, whoever is blown up. I am sick—sick of this concealment. I suppose Mold, now he knows, will tell Cloete. I wonder what she will think?"

The duty which Brancepeth had taken upon himself rendered it necessary that he should see Miss Sparshott and confer with her about details; and as he was now engaged in the work, he bent his steps from Fossebraye & Mold's office in the direction of the Museum. Cloete Sparshott had never again appeared at the bank; and though Brancepeth had found two or three excuses for writing to her about her father's affairs, her acknowledgments had been grateful but studiedly formal Once he had called, but had received for answer that the young lady was not at home—a statement which he had accepted with doubts, and had gone away with his grumbles insufficiently consoled by the reflection that it was better after all for both of them that they should not meet. "And here I am again," he said to himself, "bent on singeing my wings again, and torturing the girl too, very likely. You are a coward, Stephen Brancepeth—a weak coward; and worse than that, you are a dishonest one. Is it not enough for you to torment yourself, without causing suffering to the girl too? Compromising her again, perhaps. If Dora knew of my visit, we should have a fine scene wrought out of it. Well, *her* day is at hand; and when the whole story is public property, and when we have been discussed, abused, and sneered at most likely, then Cloete will have her revenge, and our relations to each other will be clearly enough defined. How the girl will despise me!" And Brancepeth winced at the thought of the comparison between Cloete, in all the pride of her fresh young beauty, and his —well, his matured helpmate.

There was no one about the Museum, and the Doctor in one corner, with spectacles and a magnifying-glass, was peering over a case of specimens, and so absorbed in his observations that he took no notice of the transit of Brancepeth across his horizon. Stephen passed him without speaking, took out a card, pencilled upon it "On particular business relating to Dr Sparshott," and handed it to the servant-girl who answered his knock. Mary, who, like every one else in Earlsport, knew the old love-story, and had a just contempt for Brancepeth's desertion of her mistress, favoured him with a vicious look, but presently returned to say that Miss Sparshott would receive him.

Brancepeth almost uttered a groan as he came into the room. He saw the fair young vision before him, her simple white frock of muslin bound at the waist by a sash of broad blue ribbon, her cheeks glowing with health, and a flush of eager surprise that could not be concealed, her rich masses of hair loosely knotted above her head, her half-bare dimpled arms, the exquisitely arched lips which he had once kissed—ah, would he ever kiss them again!—but behind this, and visible only to himself, was the figure of Dorothy Colpoys, like a dark storm-cloud, threatening to discharge its lightnings upon them both. He saw all that he had lost—what had he won?—and, maddened by the thought, he felt inclined to dash out of the room without another word; but he just succeeded in mastering himself, and took the outstretched hand which Cloete frankly offered to him.

"There is nothing wrong, I hope, Mr Brancepeth?" she asked, anxiously. "I do trust that there has not been any more trouble to you about my father."

"Oh no; make your mind easy about that," said Brancepeth, seating himself; "but you know I promised to go into the Doctor's affairs, and you were good enough to say that you would allow me to help you"—Cloete looked doubtful,—"and so I thought I would look in to tell you what I had done, and see if there was anything new in which I could be of use to you. I learn that the Doctor has got another bill coming on at the Metropolitan and Rural Bank."

"Ah, you know that," said Cloete, sadly. "Yes, it has been troubling him much. I wonder how people *will* let him have money."

"Ah, you do not know how many unknown friends you have," returned Brancepeth, laughing. "You will never guess who the benevolent lender of the thirty pounds was."

"A Mr Spung, I understand—a man who has got a small shop in the town," replied Cloete. "He has several times got money for my father; though I have been to him, and told him he is not to do it."

"Spung is a mere blind," said Brancepeth, eyeing her keenly. "The money really comes from Mr Mold, who apparently takes a deep interest in your father—or in you, shall I say?"

"Mr Mold!" and Cloete flushed all over. "It is impossible; and yet—yes, I know that he had been interfering in my father's affairs, but I never dreamt that the money that came from Mr Spung was his."

"You must pardon me if I have done anything I should not have done, but I have seen Mr Mold, and told him that I was arranging your father's affairs, and that if he required any assistance in future, the matter had better be transacted through our bank."

"And what did he say?" asked Cloete, doubtfully.

"Well, it struck me that he was just a little piqued, but he acceded very pleasantly."

"Oh, I am glad!" cried Cloete, forgetting herself in the sense of relief from further importunities on the part of Mr Mold. "If you knew all. Mr Mold"—and here she checked herself in time to remember that Mr Brancepeth was of all men the most unfitting to be chosen as a confidant of the proposal Mr Mold had made her.

"I think I know," said Brancepeth, gently. "I am afraid that Mold has not been disinterested in this matter. I hope he has not dared to persecute you. Poor Cloete! how I wish I might bear all your troubles as easily as I can relieve you of this!" and in his tenderness he sought to take her hand, which the girl, however, hurriedly snatched away.

"No," said Cloete, with a smile of assumed firmness; "I can hold my own against Mr Mold—against any one. I am a woman now," and she drew herself up bravely.

"Ah, Cloete, you were but a child when I first knew you! I am not sure that I did not like you best so, although you have—well, I shall not speak my thoughts."

"No," returned Cloete; "let us talk of what you came about. Father and I are very, very grateful to you, and I do hope we shall be able to pay back this money; but I wish it could have been arranged any other way."

"You mean that you would rather have Mr Mold for a creditor than me? Is this your friendship, Cloete?"

"No," she thoughtfully replied, "it is not exactly that. I know you and trust you more than any one else. Have you not always been kind to me? But what will Mr Mold think—what will people think if he tells what you are doing for us?"

"Do not be afraid, Cloete; the good people of Earlsport will soon have more sensational news to digest. Have they any right to say that we are not to be friends—good friends—and to help one another when the chance offers?"

"No," said Cloete, doubtfully; "but it is so difficult to make things look as right as they are."

"Don't trouble yourself too much about

it. In our consciousness of innocence we can afford to despise malicious gossip. And we shall always be friends, Cloete, as we are now, whatever may happen to either of us." And he took her hand, which this time she did not draw away.

"The past binds us together—me to you, at any rate, with links of recollection that can never be broken. Ah, Cloete! it was a dream, a sweet dream, too bright and sweet to last."

"To me it has proved a waking reality," replied she, with dignified sadness.

"Forgive me, darling," he cried, as, overcome by his feelings, he clasped her in his arms; "I have wronged your love—I know it—I feel it day and night; and to hold you thus is at once my bliss and my curse! Oh, my darling, my darling!" and he pressed a passionate kiss upon the lips of the struggling girl, as she tore herself from his embraces.

"Mr Brancepeth!" panted Cloete, as she

escaped to the other side of the room and stood all flushed and disordered, resting her hand upon a table. "This must not be! Have you forgotten that there is nothing now between us but friendship? and must that be broken off too? You have made me feel ashamed of myself—you have made me feel less in my own eyes. Leave me now, and remember that unless you can exercise more control over yourself we must never meet again."

Brancepeth felt humiliated before the pure, tender, but dignified woman, who now in her affronted modesty and hurt innocence stood facing him with severe reproach. How guilty he felt she could not conceive. The shade of Dorothy, which had temporarily escaped his vision, was there, vindictive and outraged. A sense of the enormity of his rashness took a paralysing hold of him. If she could feel it thus, how insulted, how indignant would she be if she knew all! It was with deep self-abasement that Brancepeth made a step towards Cloete, who waved him back with a repelling gesture.

"Forgive me, Cloete, if you can," he said, humbly enough, "and forget, if you can, my violence. God knows I did not mean to alarm you; but when you are beside me, I am not master of myself. I shall not offend again, I swear to you. Forgive me, and let us part friends."

She took the hand which was pressed upon her, and stood with heaving breast and averted eyes, while he unconsciously transgressed again by pressing his lips upon her wrist, and without another word hurried out of the room.

"Stephen Brancepeth," he muttered to himself as he went out to the street, "I always thought you were a fool, but I never owned to you being a scoundrel. But to-day you have behaved like a villain. And how do I know that you would not do worse if you had the opportunity? All this fuss you are making about her father's debts is just only to get another chance of seeing her, to be with her, to burn your fingers again, and ruin the girl. Yes, Stephen Brancepeth, you are acting like a coward, a rascally coward."

And carrying on such comfortable self-communings, he reached the bank, and prepared to settle down at his desk in a white-heat of indignation with himself and with the universe in general. "It is Dorothy's blame, with all that confounded mystery of hers," he growled, comforted to some extent at being able to grasp a scape-goat. "This must end the matter. If I tell her about Cloete, and say that I am not sure of myself, she will declare our marriage quickly enough. She is jealous as the devil," he added bitterly, quite forgetting that he had so recently given the unsuspecting lady good cause to be so. "I shall write her this afternoon, and make a clean breast of the whole business — tell her that my only safety lies in the immediate announcement of our marriage."

Brancepeth might have spared himself the trouble of carrying out this resolve, as indeed he did spare himself when he had sufficiently calmed down into a more indifferent mood; for the sum and substance of all he would or could have told her on the subject was already on the way to Dorothy Colpoys in the Earlscourt letter-bag. "A Sincere Friend," knowing the warm interest that the Honourable Miss Colpoys took in Mr Stephen Brancepeth, begged to inform her that that gentleman, under the pretence of taking a friendly interest in Dr Sparshott's affairs, was endeavouring to entrap the curator's daughter into an intrigue, to which the writer feared the young lady, ignorant of Mr Brancepeth's condition as a married man, might too readily fall a victim. To save an innocent young lady and an erring husband was, the writer begged the Honourable Miss Colpoys to believe, the sole motive of his invoking her intervention.

Mr Mold had rolled his eyeballs wildly over this epistle, which he had written out in a feigned hand, and chuckled gleefully as he himself dropped it into the post-office.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE ELOPEMENT.

When the moment came for George Colpoys to carry out his plans, he felt a half-hearted inclination to abandon the enterprise, and to rush off to his elder brother and confess his meditated guilt. He had so long been dependent for everything upon his senior, and had from boyhood stood so much in awe of him, that there seemed to him to be something unnatural and impious in thus openly rebelling and throwing off the yoke which he had always borne, galling as he had found it to be. George frankly confessed to himself that he was a coward, or rather would be one, but for Mary Donne's sake. That was the thought which nerved him, which made him feel man enough to break through Lord Earlsfield's most cherished projects. It was this, too, that made his course a righteous one, for was he not delivering a hapless maiden from a fate of lifelong misery and peril? This was an end which must sanctify even such means as George was going to use, and he made the most of the encouragement that the idea afforded. But for all the consolation that he could administer to himself, he felt that he was nervous, and, what was worse, he feared that Mary knew he was so.

As for Mary Donne, her feelings were scarcely less uneasy. So far as she could see, it was her only escape from the terrible future that awaited her if she remained at Earlscourt. That in the end Lord Earlsfield would compel her to marry Harold, she had not the slightest doubt. Lord Earlsfield always succeeded in obtaining his own way, and she mistrusted her own powers of making a sufficient struggle against his determined will. And this alternative which she was going to wildly choose seemed to her, now that she stood fairly committed to it, to be only a degree less desperate. It is true she loved George Colpoys; how it had come about she could scarcely tell, but he seemed so much in every way preferable to Harold. They had been thrown very much together, and a close confidence had sprung up between them; but she was not at all insensible to the defects of his character. George Colpoys had always been the helot of the Earlscourt household, and his shortcomings had been sufficiently dwelt upon by his brother and sisters to impress themselves on Mary, however leniently she might be disposed to look upon them. She was sensible that George was not without his good qualities: he had a more kindly heart than any of the other Colpoyses, and this was Mary's forlorn-hope—the faint ray of light that seemed to guide her leap in the dark. That he was lazy, careless, and unconscientious she could not help admitting, but it must henceforth be her duty to counteract these failings. That he might have been vicious, so far as his circumscribed opportunities allowed, had even been darkly hinted; but it would now be her care to strictly repress all such tendencies. And George was so easy-minded, so good-tempered, that surely it would not be such a difficult task to steer him through temptations and to thoroughly domesticate him. So as to the future Mary was not without hope,—there was a chance of love and happiness in it that she would sedulously cultivate; but it was the present, the terrible step that she must take to pass from the old life to the new, that appalled her.

And when the critical moment came, her nerve might have forsaken her, had action been necessary on her part; but the member had arranged everything in a very characteristic and quite Georgian fashion. And, luckily for them both, Lord Earlsfield was so engrossed by his son's illness that he had little time to give his thoughts to anything else, and suspicions which, under more leisurely circumstances, might have been aroused, never presented themselves to his mind. Harold still kept his own apartments, and though Peters's reports were reassuring, it was evident that the crisis was not past. Every morning at breakfast Lord Earlsfield formally delivered himself of his latest bulletin regarding his son's condition: his cold was improving, was a good deal better, was almost gone; but he must be careful how he ventured out again in case of a chill—statements which were received with a dead silence that was most irritating to his lordship. He divined that they suspected the truth, and his wrath against them rose accordingly, while their obvious fears secretly aggravated his own anxiety.

So when George announced his intention of starting for town, he received his dismissal and the means of the campaign curtly enough, but without any trouble. It was one person less in the house, in case Harold's condition should become worse, and concealment be no longer possible. And when, the same forenoon, Mary Donne received a telegram from her old aunt at York, intimating her serious illness, and begging her niece to come to her at once, Lord Earlsfield cheerfully recognised the hand of Providence overruling, as was meet, all things for his own aims. Nothing could have suited him better than Mary Donne's absence for a few days, until Harold was well and able to be about again; and he felt positively grateful to the old aunt whose illness had occurred at such an *à propos* time. So he anxiously pressed Mary's departure, with much formal sympathy for its cause. And when George congratulated himself on being her fellow-passenger as far as the junction at Beechborough, where he was to catch the London train, Lord Earlsfield laid his commands on him that he was to see her safely delivered to her aunt in York, and then take the night express to town. The danger of throwing the two together for a few hours did not bulk in Lord Earlsfield's innocent imagination in comparison with his desire to get them away from Earlscourt, and the fact that they would henceforth be separated until after Harold and Mary's marriage.

It was quite time for George Colpoys to be gone. His appointment to the Chairmanship of the Canal Board had been signed, and would appear in the 'Gazette' within twenty-four hours. His retiring address to the electors of Earlsport was written out and in his pocket, and would be posted to the local papers from York that same evening. In that document the member referred with much complacency to the high trust which had been reposed in him by her Majesty's Government, and to the critical condition of Dock and Inland Navigation questions, which alone could have prevailed upon him to sacrifice the interests and attachment of the constituency which he had so long represented, he might venture to say with results that had been to their mutual honour and advantage. Had he ever allowed his public life to be ruled by personal considerations, no inducements could have been put forward strong enough to make him resign one of the highest privileges to which any man could aspire—the honour of representing the free, independent, and intelligent electors of the borough of Earlsport; but there were times, George continued loftily, when the imperious calls of State necessity compelled a man to merge the individual in the patriot, and to subordinate his private feelings to the exigencies of Government. George did not hesitate to give the Earlsport electors clearly to understand that the existence of the Ministry was intimately connected with his acceptance of the Chairmanship of the Board of Docks and Canals. In selecting him, all conscious as he was of his demerits for filling so responsible a situation, the Government had not so much done honour to him as to his constituents; and it behoved the electors of Earlsport to strengthen the hands of the Ministry, and to rally round a candidate who would be a tower of strength to the Government amid the malignant attacks of a selfish and unscrupulous Opposition, who, in its lust for office, was "resolved to ruin or to rule the State."

"There!" said George, as he signed his name with a flourish to this precious document,—"that should do with them. Elliott can't say that I haven't recommended his man. Unless I had put in the fellow's name, I could not have done more. But, good Lord! think of Earlsfield when he reads it!"

Only when they were fairly bestowed in a York carriage could George and Mary Donne safely give vent to their feelings. He could now conceal his trepidation under an assumption of humorous swagger; she could now indulge her disposition to cry unchecked. In the minds of both there was a nervous dread lest something terrible should befall them ; and they scanned the platform lest perchance Lord Earlsfield might have already become alarmed and overtake them, or at least some messenger follow them from the Court with a mandate of recall. But the train with their fortunes steamed slowly out of the station without any interruption, and George's spirits rose as they advanced. It was true that there was a quarter of an hour's delay at Beechborough Junction, where a telegram might be delivered to them ; but when they had gone so far, even that might now be treated with defiance. They had a start of three hours before another train could leave Earlsport, and unless Lord Earlsfield followed them by a special, they were safe from interruption until the marriage was duly celebrated.

"You mustn't give way, my darling," consoled George, when he had allowed Mary to have her cry undisturbed. "We have managed everything beautifully. Not a breath of suspicion at the Court ; and in another two hours we shall be man and wife, and then I would like to see who would dare to part us, my own!"

At this Mary, of course, sobbed more bitterly. "Oh, George, it seems all so terrible, so wrong, this deceiving every one and going off together in this fashion! What will people say? It will never be forgotten against us."

"Yes, it will, dearest. If you had been a borough member you would never mind what people say of you, you would be so well accustomed to being abused. Why, you will be a heroine in town. They will want your photographs in the window, and be hanged to 'em."

This did not mend matters, and George proceeded, "We have got everything as smooth as turf before us. We just get into a cab at York Station and drive to church, and there the parson and clerk and couple of witnesses are waiting for us. Clibbetts and his wife, most respectable people, I assure you, keeps a livery stable near Goodram gate, and does a little bit of quiet training besides. It was he who sent off the telegram to you. We ran halves in a horse for the Lincoln Handicap, which won all but by a neck. Most respectable person, I assure you, and his wife too, I believe."

"O George!" cried Mary, a sense of the ludicrous lightening up her troubles, "could you find no one better than a stable-keeper to witness our marriage? What would Lord Earlsfield think?"

"Well, to be sure, I daresay he would flare up about it; but as he will be down on the whole affair, that item won't matter much. Besides, you have no idea what a clever fellow Clibbetts is. Just the very man to see you through a delicate business."

"And now," said George, taking her in his arms, "you are my own dear wife, or you will be in a very little, and you are going to be ever so happy, and never to fret any more, and we shall never trouble ourselves about the Earlscourt people, but just let them say and do what they please. I daresay Earlsfield will come down in time—you were always such a prime favourite with him—and will be glad to kill the fatted calf for us some day. And even if he doesn't, we can be happy by ourselves, cannot we? And, O Mary! if I ever allow myself to forget the sacrifice you have made for me, I shall be a tenfold worse fellow even than I believe I am."

"I am sure your sacrifice is the greater," sighed Mary. "You have cut yourself away from your family and given up Parliament for me, and all to save me from an unhappy marriage. O George! are you sure that you love me? That you will always love me? And never upbraid me with what you have to give up for my sake?"

"Love you, my darling!" cried George; "don't I, just! And if I could not go on loving you, life wouldn't be worth having. I make no sacrifice. It is you, Mary, who are sacrificing all for my sake, and pray God I may live to repay you;" and the member seized her hands and covered them with kisses.

And thus the way crept on, and each drew confidence from the other, and when at Beechborough there was no telegram or other information of the enemy, the spirits of both rose in proportion. George insisted upon the reluctant Mary drinking a glass of sherry, while he refreshed himself with a stronger stimulant; and thus fortified, he was able to take a very golden view of the future, and to cheer Mary with pleasant visions of their happiness when, the ordeal once over, they could settle down in London to the enjoyment of domestic bliss. And when York was reached, it was with alacrity he sprang from the railway carriage and assisted his bride to descend, while he bustled about and got porters to take care of their luggage, which was to be left at the station and transferred to the London train later on.

The thoughtful Mr Clibbetts had one of the private carriages which he let on hire duly waiting, and a coachman thoroughly instructed in the duty expected of him. But just as Mary had been placed in the carriage, George happened to catch sight of Mr Mold emerging from the station, and a wicked idea struck him.

"I say, Mary, here is Mold the lawyer—Fossebraye & Mold, you know. By Jove! we'll have him with us. Family solicitor, you know—quite the proper thing"—and before Mary could interpose an objection, George rushed off, and had button-holed his victim.

"Hilloa, Mold! just the man I could have wished to get hold of. I have come here upon some business with Miss Donne, and you'll come with us and help us through with it."

"Most happy, I am sure, to be of any assistance to Miss Donne," replied Mr Mold, bowing and rolling his eyes at Mary, "if your business doesn't take long. I have an engagement in the city in about an hour—Earlsfield business, too. The old Coombe mine dispute with the Elsedale Valley Company."

"All right, jump in—we shall not detain you; we have only a few minutes' drive." And the member pushed Mr Mold into the carriage, jumping in after him, and the coachman, who had his orders, drove away without any directions.

It only took a few minutes, in the course of which Mr Mold's native politeness induced him to address Miss Donne upon such interesting subjects as the delightfully seasonable weather, the antiquarian resources of York, its charming mixture of county, military, and clerical society, and the length of stay she purposed to make, regretting that he himself was so tied to work that he had to get back to Earlsport by the last train that same evening. Was Mr Colpoys going back? No; Mr Colpoys's intention was to proceed to London by the night mail.

"Ah! going to attend the rest of the session. Well, you have been away a good spell. Have the Whips been grumbling, or your Earlsport Committee letting out at you?"

"Neither, Mr Mold," returned George. "But I don't mind telling you as a friend, Mr Mold, that you will have a fresh election in Earlsport before a month is over, and that you will have the pleasure of reading my farewell address in to-morrow morning's newspapers. I trust you will like it."

"Great heavens!" cried Mr Mold, in consternation. "I really beg your pardon, Miss Donne; but this is startling news. And you have really thrown up?"

"Her gracious Majesty," said George, loftily, "has been pleased to employ my humble merit in an important administrative appointment which will prevent me devoting that time to my constituents which I would have to bestow upon them if I were to conscientiously keep my seat;" and George grinned at his own idea.

"What! you have got a place, then?" cried Mr Mold, with unfeigned joy. "I hope it is a good one,—work a sinecure and a heavy salary."

"Bread and cheese," returned the other, carelessly, — "mere bread and cheese. But here we are at last," and the carriage pulled up in front of an ancient and somewhat dilapidated-looking church, which required all the excuse that its foundations and walls built of Roman remains afforded, for its continued existence in an archiepiscopal city.

In the porch were the expectant Mr and Mrs Clibbetts, gorgeously arrayed in honour of the ceremony — he in shiny hat, tight-buttoned blue frock, and immense yellow gloves; she in all the glory of crimson silk gown, beaded and bugled dolman, and a smart bonnet in which waxen grapes, mixed with ivy tendrils, nodded over her crisp forelock. There came a look of discomfiture over the good woman's face. A bride in quiet travelling costume of dark colour, a round hat, and coloured gloves—this was not like what a propitious wedding ought to be; and Mrs Clibbetts felt ill at ease. Her husband had told her they were making "a bolt of it"; but, considering the rank of the parties, she had expected something more seemly—some style more in keeping with the orthodox mode of celebrating marriage than this. So she kept timidly in the background, while her more self-possessed husband advanced to welcome the bridegroom. But before any one could speak, Mr Mold had taken in the situation. "Why? what?" he cried, clutching George Colpoys by the arm—"what in heaven's name is all this? You are not going to be married?"

"It looks very much like it, Mold, doesn't it?" said George, jeeringly. "You see you have fallen in for a good thing all by accident. And now that we have you here, you shall give away the bride."

"Her! her!" cried Mold, looking with horror towards Mary Donne. "Don't you know she has hardly a penny?"

"Hush! that has nothing to do with the matter; but come along inside, and don't let us stand here attracting notice. Let us go in, my love," and he took hold of Mary's arm and led her inside the church.

But Mold was not to be shaken off. "Does Lord Earlsfield know of this?" he asked in a hoarse whisper.

"Not a syllable," replied George, calmly; "but if you will kindly convey him the news, I daresay you will have the satisfaction of giving him a pleasant surprise. But he will see it all in the papers to-morrow morning."

"Then I forbid the banns!" cried Mold, wildly. They were now in the centre of the church, and the lawyer rolled his eyes towards the roof and stretched out his hands with the gesture of an inspired prophet. Mary shrank back in dismay, but the bridegroom was equal to the occasion.

"Tush, you fool!" he said, "there are no banns. It is a special licence. Get into that pew there, out of the way. Clibbetts will make as good a father as you would;" and he pushed Mr Mold into a seat and Mrs Clibbetts after him, so that the lawyer could not move out past her.

The priest, a hunting clergyman from a rural parish, who was wont to make stealthy visits to Newmarket, where George had formed an acquaintance with him, was ready by the altar, and the service began and proceeded with due reverence. The beautiful and impressive words of the exordium recalled George Colpoys to the solemnity of the moment, and Mary's tears flowed freely. The only feature that marred the effect was the officious kindness of Mr Clibbetts, who had never "given away" any one before, and conceived his position to involve the duties of a "backer" in a general way. His whispered "Don't take on now, there's a dear;" "Cheer up, you'll be all right in a jiffy;" and an encouraging "There now!" as George placed the ring upon her finger, was passed unheeded by Mary in her agitation, but drew down glances of reproachful scorn from the scandalised clerk. Mrs Clibbetts readily caught the contagion of tears, and wept softly in her seat. As for Mr Mold, he sat rolling his eyes wildly upon vacancy, seeing nothing and almost hearing nothing. The only part of the service that struck his attention was George Colpoys's utterance of "With all my worldly goods I thee endow," when Mr Mold could not help groaning out "My bills!"

When the parties returned from the vestry, Mr Mold made another endeavour to get at the member. "What do you mean to do about these bills of Davis of Dover Street, Mr Colpoys? I hope you are all square, but after this you have really—yes, you have really shaken my confidence."

"Ah, those bills," said George, with a mock sigh of sorrow, "to be sure. Well, Mold, I'll tell you what I am going to do. I am going to put my affairs into the hands of your partner, Fossebraye, and if Davis of Dover Street will present himself personally—personally, mind—we shall see what can be done about it. Will that satisfy you?"

But Mr Mold shook his head. An interview between George Fossebraye and Mr Davis of Dover Street was of all things that which he was anxious to avoid.

"Never mind, Mold," said the good-natured member; "if I have any luck you shall not lose by me; and I have no doubt I shall be able to make matters square for you in time. And now, go and congratulate my wife, and be off to Earlsport. You carry news with you that might send you through six editions."

Thus cheered, Mr Mold was able to offer his felicitations to the bride; and leave having been taken of the good-natured Clibbettses, who had sense enough to decline George's somewhat ill-advised invitation to come and have refreshment with them at the hotel, the newly-married pair drove off to pass the afternoon as best they might until time came for the express to start.

"There, my dear," said George, triumphantly, as, seated by his wife's side with an arm round her, he gave her a fond and lingering kiss,—"didn't I tell you that we should get through all right? There is no power on earth can part us now, my own one."

"No, George," sobbed Mary; "and I am very happy, but—but it is not——"

"Not according to Hoyle, you mean," finished her husband. "Well, perhaps it isn't; but we are fast enough married for all that: and, please God, Mary, you shall never regret it."

And thus, amid smiles and tears, was ended the strange nuptials of George Colpoys and Mary Donne.

CHAPTER XLII.

RUIT CŒLUM.

The morning after the departure of George and Mary found a quieter and even duller party than usual assembled round the Earlscourt breakfast-table. Lord Earlsfield was unhappy, in spite of the sense of relief which he felt in Mary Donne being absent during Harold's illness; the condition of his son remained much the same, and did not, in Peters's eyes, show any signs of immediate improvement. Mr Harold had something in his head which was worrying him, the shrewd servant opined, but what the vexation was he could not form the least idea. Neither could Lord Earlsfield; but he had a vague notion that his marriage plans had unsettled his son: and though he had no intention of altering his designs, he was miserable in consequence. Mrs Firebrace was cross and Dorothy was bored—bored beyond measure, and longing to be able to carry off her husband to love and the Continent; but Brancepeth was becoming more and more difficult to manage, and more irate at the postponement of the disclosure which she could not summon up courage to make.

Lord Earlsfield, having curtly answered inquiries about Harold, speedily intrenched himself behind the 'Earlsport Mercury,' although, as a rule, he objected to either newspapers or correspondence at the breakfast-table. But on this occasion he wished to be left at peace, and to afford no opportunities for talk. His retirement into himself, however, did not last long. Mechanically he glanced along the columns of the newspaper, started, fixed his eyes on a particular paragraph, read eagerly, and then laid down the paper with a bewildered air. Again he snatched it up, read again with stormy brows and a rising agitation, and finally dashed the journal down upon the table with an inarticulate growl, which finally shaped itself into a terrible imprecation, making Mrs Firebrace stuff her fingers into her ears and Dorothy jump from her seat in consternation.

"In heaven's name, brother," gasped Mrs Firebrace, "what is the matter?"

"Matter, madam!" almost shrieked his lordship; "the matter is, your brother has gone to the devil and taken Mary Donne with him;" and without another word Lord Earlsfield rose from the table, crushing papers and letters together angrily in his hand, and retreated to his own room, quite oblivious of his all but untasted breakfast.

He read and re-read again all the terrible paragraphs before he could gather his mind together sufficiently to realise the full extent of the calamity. There was the paragraph announcing George's appointment to the chairmanship of the Board of Inland Navigation; there was his impudent valedictory address to his late constituents; and there was the editor's brief reference to the marriage that had taken place in York. There, too, was the notice of the marriage itself, in the usual column devoted to such offences, heading the list:—

"At St Elfled's Church, by the Rev. Richard Rawlings, B.A., vicar of Furzeland-cum-Barefield, George Colpoys, Esq., M.P. for Earlsport, to Mary, only child of the late Colonel Donne, C.B., R.A., formerly M.P. for Blackboy. No cards."

The good editor of the 'Mercury' had been sorely puzzled what to say about these complicated proceedings. George had taken due care that the intelligence should reach him just before going to press, and the worthy man had had no opportunity of consulting any one as to what these portents meant. So he contented himself with a bare announcement of the facts, reserving comments until he could ascertain in what direction the wind blew.

To a man like Lord Earlsfield, whose proud nature had surrounded himself with circumstances which he could legitimately control, and who had always kept aloof from conditions and complications which might involve his superiority to them being called in question, such a blow as that which he had received could not be estimated by the effects which it might have produced upon ordinary men in the midst of the world. Lord Earlsfield knew, and wanted to know, no power greater than himself. It was for this, and to increase the power which he already possessed, that he had chosen a life so isolated as that which he led at Earlscourt. He avoided always, when he could, meeting any one of higher rank than himself, and when he was compelled to do so, he would generally find some valid excuse for taking his stand upon the higher rung of the ladder. When he had taken part in public life this exclusiveness had been his sole source of influence, and he had found it to be by no means an insignificant one. But the give-and-take, the rough-cum-tumble course of political life, had not been to Lord Earlsfield's taste, and he had soon forsaken it to form a sphere for himself where his will might be law and his word order, and from which all elements of revolt and disturbance were carefully excluded. All his relations were completely dependent upon him, and as long as they gave him due honour and worship he was pleased to act the part of a providence—stern, it might necessarily be, but always just. His decrees were good, and obedience to them necessarily implied happiness; disobedience was guilt of the deepest dye, and its worst punishment was, as in the case of Jim Colpoys and the borough of Earlsport, to be given over wholly to its consequences, to remain cut off from all communion with himself, until misery had wrought penitence and penitence contrition, when pardon and restoration would assuredly follow. But to create a little world and play at being its providence is always a perilous pastime, for that huge, ungainly, untowardly, outer *kosmos* is always sure to overshadow our pretty pleasure-ground, and blight ourselves beneath its cold adumbrations.

But this catastrophe owed all its bitterness to its interior origin. Lord Earlsfield could have armed himself against external hostility, but these his foes were of his own household. It was rebellion, mutiny,—the blackest, basest ingratitude. So he sat like a crushed Saturn, among broken levin-bolts and unexplosive thunder-clouds, while all the hosts of Olympus were holding a rebellious saturnalia, and deriding his power. It was impossible to shape his thoughts into taking a grasp of the situation. It was the wicked defiance of his will that took exclusive possession of his ideas, shutting out all considerations of what its practical consequences might involve to himself. Nothing in the annals of the house of Earlsfield had ever afforded a parallel to this, and it was little wonder though Lord Earlsfield's thoughts failed to take in its full immensity of wickedness. He had never so thoroughly realised his own powerlessness until he came to think what punishment could be meted out to these two offenders. Impunity! contempt! to be cut off for ever from Earlscourt and from the community of the Colpoys family—terrible punishment as it was—was ridiculously inadequate for such a crime as George Colpoys and Mary Donne had committed. Lord Earlsfield thought over the tortures of the middle ages, burning at the stake, the rack, and the gibbet,—there was a "dule-tree" in Earlscourt Park, where Earl Sweyn, as was averred, had hanged such caitiffs as had made themselves disagreeable to him in any way,—but all these penalties were insufficient expiation, even if they had been practicable for him, which they were not. And so he sat incapable of acting—of thinking almost—broken-down, humiliated, and baffled, encompassed on all sides by the ruins of his plans and hopes.

Meanwhile the two ladies left behind in the breakfast-room had sat eyeing each other in consternation and terror, not knowing what dire calamity had happened, until Dorothy suggested that they might inquire whether the servants knew of anything wrong. The 'Mercury' had as usual passed under the butler's scrutiny before being laid by Lord Earlsfield's plate, and that grave domestic had no difficulty in explaining to the ladies the cause of Lord Earlsfield's discomfiture. Indeed, he was able to produce another copy of the 'Mercury,' for the news had caused such excitement in the lower regions of Earlscourt that a stable-boy had been made to run all the way to Earlsport for another copy of the newspaper. There were the whole details of the calamity, which the ladies read with many comments, conjectures, and questions; and when they had taken in all the facts, they discussed them with bated breath. Mrs Firebrace drew from the occurrence a fresh proof of the ubiquitous activity of Satan's operations, who had allured these two wretched souls, that had scoffed at her warnings and derided her counsels, to their mutual destruction. Mrs Firebrace speedily reasoned herself into a belief that she had foreseen everything that had happened, and that George and Mary's miserable fall was the direct result of their neglecting the counsels which she had not failed to bestow upon them. Dorothy was at heart rather elated at this bold defiance of her elder brother's dreaded authority. Amid the trouble thus excited in the domestic waters, her own skiff might escape safely to port. At all events, she was not the only rebel among the Colpoyses, and her sin was venial compared to George's heinous offences. So, unheeding the lamentations of Mrs Firebrace, who prophesied all sorts of misfortunes, both temporal and spiritual, to the guilty pair, Dorothy began to consider how this new crisis might affect her own affairs, and what possibilities there were of turning it towards inclining Lord Earlsfield to look with more indulgence upon her own slip. She must see Brancepeth at once and talk over matters with him, and consult whether the time had not come when they might take Lord Earlsfield and the world into their confidence. So engrossed was she in her own thoughts that she paid no attention to Mrs Firebrace's discourse, although it had several times been more directly addressed to herself.

"I am sure, Dora, you might select some more suitable occasion for letting your wits go wool-gathering," at last broke in that lady, with a tartness and acerbity in her tones that effectually interrupted Dorothy's reverie. "Here have I been asking you this last quarter of an hour whether some of us should not go and see what Earlsfield is doing. He seems to have given way entirely under this shock —poor man! he does not know the right direction to turn to for consolation. He may get a fit, or he may do something desperate. I wish you would go to the library and see what he is doing."

"No, thank you," returned Dorothy, drily. "I have no wish to intrude upon him. Lord Earlsfield is old enough to take care of himself, and really I don't see what there is to make such a fuss about. It is quite absurd for Earlsfield to think that he can move us about and order and arrange us just as he pleases, as if we were a set of chessmen. We have been all of age some time now, and should be allowed to arrange our destinies for ourselves. I am sure I wish George and Mary Donne may be happy—and I have no doubt they will be, if they can get anything to live upon."

"Dora!" exclaimed her sister, holding up her hands in horror. "How could they be happy! What can they expect after the deceit they have practised—their falseness and hypocrisy, their flying in the face of God and man—than misery in this world and eternal punishment hereafter?"

"Humph!" said Dorothy; "I daresay if they get anything to live upon, they will rub along well enough."

"Anything to live upon!" cried Mrs Firebrace. "What does it signify what they live upon—with what they nourish perishing bodies doomed to destruction?"

"That is all very well," yawned Dorothy, "but I do hope they will manage to get along somehow. George will have something for that appointment he has got. I wonder how much it will be."

"And I daresay you will back them up and give them money," snapped Mrs Firebrace; "you have plenty, and yet I never saw you part with a shilling for doing any good. But I suppose you will be ready enough to aid them, since they have disobeyed our brother and brought us all to shame."

"I wish I could," said Dorothy, with a sigh "but I want my money for myself. Somehow or other, it takes me all my time to make ends meet."

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Dorothy," said her sister, severely; "with your income, and with no one but yourself to spend it upon, you ought to do a power of good. You should remember that you are only a steward of the talent intrusted to you, although why Aunt Anna ever made that iniquitous will I never could comprehend. If she had divided it between us now——"

"Yes; I daresay you would soon have made your share fly in tracts," rejoined Dorothy, flippantly; "that is to say, if the Major had left any of it for you. You remember, Hetta, that Aunt Anna had considerable experience of the Major"

Indeed both the late Major and Mrs Firebrace in her unregenerate days had proved a financial thorn in the flesh of Sir Jasper Pye's widow, and had worn out her patience so much by their begging and borrowing, that she had struck out Henrietta's name from her will, and left all her money to Dorothy, safeguarding her future by the conditions with which we are all already acquainted.

Mrs Firebrace had risen in wrath at this reminder, and had just begun, "If you mean to say——" in a shrill strident voice,—when Lord Earlsfield suddenly made his appearance.

In the course of the brief interval that had elapsed since he had quitted the breakfast-room, he seemed to have aged by years. His face, always hard and stern, was sharply drawn together, and the furrows upon his forehead were more pronounced than they had seemed before. His eyes had retreated under his pent brows, and his mouth was firmly set; but, in spite of his evident effort to preserve a calm composure, there was a twitching of the facial muscles, and a general shakiness in his body, which told plainly of the severe shock he had received. The sisters looked at him in awed silence, and for some little time no word was spoken.

"I suppose," said Lord Earlsfield, with a glance at the newspaper—"I see you know all. You know how that blackguard, whose worst offence is that he is a brother of mine, has behaved. Of his treatment of myself I say nothing—let him bear the just penalty of that; but he has betrayed his public trust. He has sold his constituency—my constituency rather—for a post. He has disgraced the name of Colpoys irretrievably. I wonder," concluded Lord Earlsfield, loftily, "that the statue of his great-grandfather, the Great Lord Earlsfield, does not fall from its pedestal to the dust in the Square at the dishonour which has been heaped upon his name." Mrs Firebrace nodded a prompt assent, while his lordship paused to take breath, and Dorothy ventured to murmur a hope about things not being so bad as that; but her apology was instantly repressed by a withering frown from her brother.

"I wash my hands from henceforth both of him and her. From this day let the memory of them be in this house as if it never had been

—yes, as if it had never been. Neither of them shall set foot again under this roof, nor shall their names be ever mentioned beneath it."

Lord Earlsfield, though he strove to throw composure and due dignity into his words, was now trembling with passion.

"It is an awful blow, brother," at last Mrs Firebrace ventured to put in. "My heart bleeds for you in this terrible calamity. It is humiliating to think how deeply wickedness and deceit are ingrained in our fallen human nature. Thank God, my conscience is clear. I have always striven according to my lights to impress upon Mary Donne a sense of her sinfulness, and to lead her to better things. Only yesterday morning, before she went away, I placed a precious tract, 'Have you an Eternal Fire Insurance Policy?' with my own hands on her dressing-table."

"Pish!" said Lord Earlsfield; and turning to Dorothy, "It was you specially I wanted to speak to. I have never interfered with your spending your money in your own way; but if ever you give as much as a halfpenny to either of these—these miscreants, no matter in how great distress they are,—and they will come to beggary if there is any justice in heaven,—you are no longer sister of mine: I disown you."

"I have no intention of doing so," said Dorothy, humbly.

"My prayers night and morning shall be that they may be punished for their sins," ejaculated Mrs Firebrace, turning up her eyes and clasping her hands. "Only by suffering the just penalty of their wickedness in this world can they hope to flee from the wrath to come."

"I wish they were both dead," fumed his lordship.

"Death might do much," commented his sister, who was determined to agree with her brother, and yet improve the occasion. "Even the death of one might be the salvation of the other. It was so in my case. If I had died when poor Firebrace died, I should have just gone to hell with the Major."

"I wish to heaven you had, ma'am!" snapped Lord Earlsfield, as, provoked beyond all endurance by her preaching, he banged out of the room.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THE RIVALS.

A FEW days passed by, and Peters was at length able to report a change for the better in his patient. Harold was now more composed. He had lost the feeling of unrest, and was able to sleep without heavy opiates, and take his meals, and even to divert himself with some new scientific treatises that had arrived during the early part of his illness. But he was much exhausted, and still kept his room, and had as yet only been visible to his attendant.

Peters, however, was by no means at ease about his master's condition. "He's better, and he ain't," was his reply to Lord Earlsfield's anxious inquiry. "He is quiet enough, and he eats and sleeps well enough, and he is clear enough about everything. But he has got something in his 'ead, my lord, I don't like, whatever it is. He has got dogged about something I can't make out, and although he is making himself so well and keeping so quiet, it is the doggedness that is doing it all."

Lord Earlsfield was disquieted and puzzled. He felt sure that it could not be about Mary Donne that his son was vexing himself; for although Lord Earlsfield was quite prepared to exhibit Harold in the light of a betrayed lover, and add her cruel treatment of his son to the already long list of Mrs George Colpoys's crimes, he knew well that Harold had never entertained any special affection for Mary. So he contented himself with charging Peters to be careful and watchful, and to report to him whenever any new symptom of unrest appeared on the part of his son.

These were gloomy days at Earlscourt, and upon Dorothy especially the time hung with leaden weight. Mrs Firebrace's temper made her society risky at the best, and the disgraceful conduct of George and Mary, which furnished a theme for a never-ending homily, and supplied her with two specimen sinners, whose iniquities were inexhaustible, and whose future might be regarded as typical of that of the wicked generally, began to bore Dorothy; and she fled Mrs Firebrace's presence for the solitude of her own room, where she could at least amuse herself with novels or with the gossip of her own maid, when she grew tired of scheming and plotting over her own private affairs. How to make use of the new crisis in the house of Earlscourt was the problem which she was ever seeking to solve, and never able to determine to her satisfaction. Her position might be worse, or it might be better. The irritation which Lord Earlsfield had already received might make him more unappeasable when he became cognisant of her own act of rebellion. Or it might be that the magnitude of George's offence would make her own error more venial in the eyes of her elder brother. Dorothy sedulously sought to assure herself that this latter view was the correct one; and she carefully summed up the extenuating circumstances in her own case, as compared with the aggravating enormities of that of George. On one point in her favour she could, and did, build much hope. It was Lord Earlsfield's determination to prevent her from entering the holy state of matrimony at all that was the cause of her concealing her marriage; and he would have to bear the brunt of public censure, if he enforced his powers. She knew Lord Earlsfield's dread of a scandal, and trusted to that neutralising his love of money. As for the money, she was quite prepared that it should revert to her family in case she had no children; and Brancepeth had expressed himself utterly indifferent as to the money. This was a bribe that could well be employed in case of need; and between it and the threat of fighting her battle in the law courts, Dorothy was very hopeful. If she could only divine the proper moment for breaking the ice, all would come right; but her husband's patience was exhausted, and at every interview he had reiterated his threat of going to Lord Earlsfield himself, if she did not immediately declare their marriage.

About a week after the elopement the monotony of Dorothy's life was rudely broken in upon by the receipt of a second anonymous letter. It came by post, was written in a disguised hand, different from the first she had received, and contained only a few lines, but these were enough to throw Dorothy into a fever of jealousy and despair.

"An Unknown Friend," ran the communication, "aware of the interest which the Hon'ble Miss Colpoys takes in Mr Stephen Brancepeth, thinks it right to warn her of the guilty intercourse which exists between that gentleman and Miss Cloete Sparshott, the daughter of the curator of the Earlsport Museum. Under colour of helping her father's distresses, Mr Brancepeth has been making presents of money to Miss Sparshott, and the writer has reason to believe that they purpose an early elopement together. The Hon'ble Miss Colpoys is requested to immediately destroy this disinterested and friendly warning."

The first effect of this letter was to throw Dorothy into an unreasoning fury of revenge, —revenge against her husband—revenge upon the girl who had taken him away from her. But it is one thing to wish for exterminating vengeance upon all who have wronged us, and another to carry our wishes into effect. When Dorothy came to seek for a practicable vent for her wrath, she was sobered down at the discovery of her limited powers. She could quarrel with her husband—she could insist that the secret marriage should be as if it had never been, and that they should meet no more; but this was not what she wanted. She knew well enough that Brancepeth's love for her, never very ardent, had considerably cooled of late, and that in his altered circumstances he might accept the idea of a definite separation as freedom to which he was not indisposed. No, she would not quarrel with him: he was her property, hers by lawful purchase, she told herself, and she would do nothing that would have the effect of loosening such hold as she had. With the girl it was a different matter. Dorothy would not have been too scrupulous as to the means of getting rid of her, if she could have fallen upon any reasonable project. Heroic vengeance was out of the question. The poisoned bowl and the steel dagger, effective means as they are of getting rid of the rival, could find a place only in Dorothy's wishes: she was not going to involve herself in any compromising trouble to gratify her anger. She would not even excite public opinion against the guilty pair, and solace herself with the general sympathy which her case deserved. Here was another argument for claiming her property in the eyes of all the world, and going straightway to her brother and confessing that Brancepeth was her husband.

Unluckily for Dorothy, when she had formed a just and rational resolution, it was her nature to seek for some less direct method of compassing her end; and in this case, after having satisfied herself that a revelation of her marriage would be the most effectual step she could take, she immediately began to think of some temporising compromise which would be attended with less difficulty and inconvenience. The first prompting of jealousy to a woman is to go directly and have it out with her rival. Whatever she did, Dorothy, with feminine weakness, felt that her satisfaction would be incomplete unless she personally triumphed over this girl who was seeking to destroy her peace—had very likely destroyed it, if this letter was to be believed. And thus in her mind a resolution was conceived that she would go straight to the Museum and expose this girl's wickedness to her face, and extract a promise that she would never see or speak to Brancepeth more.

With her mind full of this, Dorothy had no rest until she set out to Earlsport with this object in view; but as she walked off her excitement, her mind began to take a calmer view of the situation. After all, it was an anonymous letter, which, as Dorothy reasoned with herself, was always meant to cause mischief, and was oftener than not based upon a direct lie. Cloete Sparshott had always seemed to her a high-minded and virtuous girl; Dorothy had felt quite drawn towards her when she had sought to serve her own aims by making a match between her and her nephew. Dorothy could not believe that one so young could be so depraved as the "Unknown Friend" had asserted. On the whole, she had less confidence in Brancepeth himself—a sceptical tendency too prevalent among wives. She would go gently and cautiously to work, and thus, perhaps, save the girl and frustrate Brancepeth's evil enterprise, before trying harsh measures.

So she broke in upon Cloete with her usual air of free kindliness and geniality, and prefaced her real business with a dip into small-talk and gossip. She had wanted to look in and see Cloete for days, but they had been all in a fluster at the Court. George's marriage had come upon them more suddenly than expected—had, in fact, taken them a little by surprise at the last moment. And Harold's illness occurring at the same time, had naturally put them all a little about.

"Nothing at all serious, you know, my dear," went on Dorothy, easily. "Just a bad cold and out of sorts—that is all. But he has been dull and moping lately. Young men get that way. My brother Earlsfield, you know, was anxious that a match should be made between him and Mary Donne; but that was absurd. Mary's affections have long been engaged to poor George, and—well, I am sure I hope they will be happy, although they won't have much to live upon. But as for Harold, he never cared for her—not even as a sister, indeed," said Dorothy, with a meaning look. "I had begun to think that he must be very much in love with some one else."

Cloete coloured slightly, and looked as unconscious as she could.

"I have never been one of those who believe in made-up marriages," continued Dorothy, reassuringly. "I would have each one be allowed a free choice. And I am quite sure that if Harold has set his heart on any girl, he will have her. Lord Earlsfield will never go against the wish of his only son. So there are good hopes that he, at least, will be allowed to be made happy his own way."

And Dorothy looked at the girl with an encouraging smile, as if to invite her confidence; but Cloete was not to be caught. She busied herself in pouring out a cup of tea for her visitor, taking an unnecessary time to drop in lumps of sugar and pour out the cream.

"Do you know, my dear," said Dorothy, leading another charge, "that I have been thinking for some time back that Harold had fallen in love with yourself? Now don't start and protest. There is nothing wrong in it. I think myself he had very good excuse; for you ought to know, my dear, that you are very beautiful. And don't jump at the idea that the matter is hopeless; for, as I said, Lord Earlsfield will never dare to go against his son in anything he has seriously set his heart upon. And I shall be on your side too. I should so like to have you for a sweet niece;" and as Cloete handed her the teacup, Dorothy endeavoured affectionately to put her arm round her waist.

But Cloete drew herself away. "You are quite mistaken, Miss Colpoys, in thinking of such a thing. Mr Colpoys has been very kind to me, and good to my father; but I would never marry him. I shall never marry any one."

"You do not know yet, my dear," returned Dorothy, benignantly. "All young girls protest that they will never marry, and perhaps think so—especially if they have had a disappointment at first. And, dear Cloete, I trust you will allow me to be a friend and advise you. You have no mother, and I am very much older than you, and have seen very much more of the world than you. I would speak to you for your good."

"You are very kind," murmured Cloete, doubtfully, sitting down at her small tea-table and beginning to play with the cups.

"Of course people talk—lying, prattling wretches as they are—and I have heard things about you that have concerned me very much, especially as I thought—and still hope—that you may some day be closer connected with me. I wish to warn you against Mr Stephen Brancepeth."

"You have no need, madam," cried Cloete, her face all aglow; she was now on her mettle, and prepared to give battle courageously.

"It is most unfitting that there should be any intimacy between you. Of course I know—that is, I have heard—that there were once love-passages between you; but let me warn you that Mr Brancepeth is a dangerous man for you to know."

"I can protect myself, Miss Colpoys," said Miss Sparshott, with all the lofty assurance of a dowager-duchess.

"You cannot," cried Dorothy, excitedly. "Even if you were innocent, you cannot close people's eyes, you cannot keep them from talking."

"They may talk as they please; Mr Stephen Brancepeth is nothing to me."

"Nothing to you!" cried Dorothy, in her turn getting angry; "but you receive him, here he visits you, and people say he is your lover. You say Stephen Brancepeth is nothing to you; and I, who know, tell you that he can be nothing to you—nothing but a danger and a snare."

"And pray what is Mr Stephen Brancepeth to you, that you take so much concern with him?" retorted Cloete, almost with a sneer.

"My husband!" cried Dorothy, in a passion; "that is what he is to me. And I dare you at your peril to come between me and him."

The two sat, glaring at each other with frowning faces and angry feelings, Cloete stunned with the revelation she had heard, and Dorothy beginning to realise that she had blurted out more in her wrath than she had intended to say. But now it was said, she must defend the position she had taken up. Upon Cloete it gradually began to dawn that Brancepeth might be indeed married—and to Dorothy even. This would explain his mysterious conduct—the despairing way in which, in spite of his protestations of abiding love, he always spoke of the future. She had never thought of such a solution of the problem. Her jealousy had now and then prompted her to think that Brancepeth might be involved in some entanglement from which he could not extricate himself. But married! The idea had never occurred to her. And to Dorothy Colpoys, who was now sitting there opposite to her, and claiming this man for her husband! It sounded so incomprehensible that it must be true. Dorothy's imagination could not have invented such a statement. It was with an involuntary look of keen criticism and with a cold shiver that Cloete next broke silence.

"Is this true?" she asked.

"Quite true," replied Dorothy. "I pledge you my word; we have been married more than a year." And Dorothy cooled down again. She must soothe this girl for the present, and at any rate bind her to silence until the proper time came to make the marriage public.

"I did not know. Of course I am surprised," said Cloete, who was now regaining control over herself, and beginning to realise the part that devolved upon her. "But I can assure you, Miss Colpoys—I mean Mrs Brancepeth—that it alters nothing so far as I am concerned. Since we parted years ago, Mr Brancepeth has been nothing to me. He has called here; he has been very kind to my father, and very helpful in our affairs,—and that is all, I can assure you."

"And he has not sought to make love to you?" asked Dorothy, with querulous doubt.

"You would not insult me by such a supposition, Miss Colpoys—I beg your pardon again—Mrs Brancepeth," replied Cloete, with heightening colour and a consciousness that she was on the bounds of equivocation. "I assure you again that there has been nothing between us since Mr Brancepeth's return. On the contrary, he told me when I first met him that he was no longer free, although he did not tell me of his marriage. But for this understanding it would have been impossible for me to have met him at all."

"I am glad to hear that. Circumstances have compelled us to keep the marriage secret, but it will soon be made known now. And you will forgive me, my dear, for what I have said in my anxiety about you."

"Certainly," returned Cloete. "I am glad you have told me. Not that it would have made any difference, for there is nothing but open friendship between Mr Brancepeth and me."

"No, no, I hope not," said Dorothy, hurriedly; "but I meant to put you upon your guard, that you might avoid meeting him at any time, and stop his visits here. Not that I mind a bit now I have told you, but to keep people from saying or suggesting anything after our marriage is known,—for your own sake, you see."

"You are very kind," said Cloete. "I shall certainly not speak to Mr Brancepeth again, or allow him to come here."

"That is good of you, my dear," approved Dorothy. "Not that I would mind a bit.

Stephen is the best and truest and most loving husband that ever woman had. And yet men are men. And he has never even made love to you, or sought to kiss you, for instance ?"

"You again insult me," cried Cloete, almost bursting into tears of rage.

"No, no, I don't mean to do that," cried Dorothy, taking her by the hand. "I know that you are all goodness. And Stephen is good too. But he is a man, and that makes all the difference—yes, all the difference; and the best are not to be depended upon. But you are a dear good creature, and I can trust you thoroughly not to say a word about all this. Family reasons compel us both to be quiet in the meantime, and I shall come and see you again soon;" and she imprinted an affectionate kiss upon each of Cloete's glowing and not over-willing cheeks.

But the rain had begun to fall as Dorothy was about to leave. She had walked: there were no cabs to be had about Earlsfield Square after business hours, and Cloete, to show her magnanimity, insisted upon her rival taking her plaid macintosh as a protection against the rain, and with so much cordiality that Dorothy accepted, saying she would not send it back, but return it herself to-morrow or next day, as an excuse for having another talk with Cloete.

Left to herself, Cloete stood long with her arm on the chimneypiece, looking dreamily into the fire. Her mind seemed a whirling chaos, and she could only catch at fragments of thoughts as they tossed about in all sorts of contortions in her brain. She was not excited, —she was only powerless to feel and realise. And as the great central fact of the situation surmounted the tumult of ideas and brought her under its control, she went mechanically towards her bedroom and sat down before her looking-glass. She saw beside her own another face there which would not have been apparent to any one looking over her shoulder—a face which fell far back into the shade of her own with its brilliant complexion, curving lips, glistening eyes, and crown of wavy hair. And as she sat there and gazed, a sense of triumph took possession of her; and if the half-suppressed sigh with which she rose from her seat could have been rendered into words, they would have had much the same significance as the vulgar expression, "Serve him right!"

CHAPTER XLIV.

DOROTHY'S DISGUISE.

As the days passed, Lord Earlsfield began slowly to recover his old composure and mastery of his surroundings, but the shock which had overtaken him had left him a less confident and firm man. Around him lay the wreck of all his schemes, and he shrank from the task of piecing them together after a new pattern, and of devising new plans to meet his altered circumstances. He had never felt alone before, had never known the want of any one to advise and assist him; but now it seemed that something had occurred which sequestered him from the sympathy and aid of his fellow-men. He had thought out his course wisely and well, considering and calculating at every step, providing, as he thought, for every possible contingency, and guarding against every possible failure. And here an incident that he had not foreseen, and could not have anticipated, had ruined all his arrangements. Was it worth the pains to undergo all the trouble over again and lay a new foundation for the future—for another unforeseeable crash, perhaps? Human nature, he began to think, was much more difficult to mould than he had imagined; it was utterly deceitful and vicious, and there was no means of suppressing it.

When he began to think of another match for Harold, the difficulties presented themselves thick and fast. Doubtless a marriage could be negotiated in the peerage or in some of the county families; but then, Harold's mental condition would have to be discussed, and the risks arising from it to be discounted. Lord Earlsfield hardly thought he could bring himself to occupy the disadvantageous position that such negotiations would entail. He knew that there were an abundance of fathers and mothers in his own rank who would willingly strike a bargain for their daughters and make no question of the taint of insanity, provided the settlements were liberal enough. Lord Earlsfield thought with disgust upon their venality: whatever might be said of his own plans, no mercenary element had entered into them, he told himself with conscious righteousness. Yet the title must now more than ever be saved from the grasp of George or his offspring. What could he do? Would he himself be compelled to marry again and have another family? He asked himself the question abstractedly, with a half shudder. He had not enjoyed matrimony when younger. Would it be at all tolerable, now that he was in years? He would not pursue the inquiry.

He rang the bell and desired that Peters, Mr Harold's man, should be sent to him. He had seen and talked with his son, and had been greatly pleased to see how much restored in health he was; but there was an alteration in the young man which he could not account for, and did not like. He had noticed a set, determined, almost menacing expression fixed upon his face, even when he had talked pleasantly and smilingly, making nothing of his past illness.

"Well, Peters, how is Mr Harold doing?" asked Lord Earlsfield as the man appeared.

"Much better, my lord—that is, he is quiet enough and settled enough, and seems all right in his head. But——" added Peters, and he seemed at a loss to complete the sentence.

"Well?" asked his lordship, anxiously, "but what?"

"There is something about him I can't make out," continued Peters, shaking his head. "He has got something in his mind, and he's doggeding on it. But what it be, I can no more think. Whatever it is, he has made up his mind about something, and has got his head hard as nuts about it. Just looks as if he had got somebody to serve out, and was corking it down until the time came when he could get at him. It would only make him worse to ask him anything about it, and unless your lordship knows anything that has put Mr Harold up, I can't think."

"No, I can think of nothing," said Lord Earlsfield, reflectively. "I really can imagine nothing that could be weighing on his mind. But keep your eyes and ears both open, Peters, and if you find out anything, let me know at once."

"I will, my lord," said Peters, with a bow. "I forgot to say, my lord, that Mr Harold talked of taking a walk this afternoon. I said I would go with him, as he was not quite strong yet; and then he snapped me up quite suddenly, and said he did not mean to go out at all. That is another thing, my lord, that makes me think he wants to be up to something."

"Well," said Lord Earlsfield, "you must on no account allow him out of your sight, Peters — at least at present. If he wants to go out, let him go; but keep your eye upon him, and see that he comes to no harm."

"I will, my lord," said Peters, as he bowed himself out; and Lord Earlsfield again abandoned himself to his unpleasant meditations. There was no respite to be found among his estate papers and plans: each of these had been but a brick in the edifice that had now been blown down about him. His accounts, satisfactory though they might be in the concrete, only raised painful suggestions of what was ultimately to become of the accumulations that he had saved and scraped together. He began to feel that his life had been wasted, noble and self-denying as it had always seemed to himself to be. He might have gone out into the world and sought pleasure and amusement there, like other men in his position. A desperate thought struck him that he might do so still; that there were compensations to be met with, resources still beyond his reach; he might marry, he might—— But the staid mind of Lord Earlsfield rose above such a wild idea. He had made a world for himself; and though it had gone to pieces, he would still calmly sit and contemplate the ruins.

After her interview with Cloete Sparshott, Dorothy had written to Brancepeth asking him to meet her; but he had evaded the interview. He had, he said, to go to London on business, and would not be back for three days. He alluded to the elopement incident, and impressed upon Dorothy that she should seize the opportunity, while the air was troubled, to reveal their secret. At all events it must be done, he said. His patience was quite worn out; he was in danger of being compromised in public opinion, by consenting to the mystery being kept up so long; and if she did not at once make up her mind to action, he himself must go to Lord Earlsfield. The marriage must be declared at once, the letter somewhat petulantly concluded, or they must definitely make up their minds to forget that it ever had been, and seek their lives apart for the future.

The peremptory tone of the letter, and the threat implied in its ending, both alarmed and irritated Dorothy. She knew well how unpropitious a time it was for her to seek to take Lord Earlsfield into her confidence. It would be even worse if Stephen announced himself to her brother, all unprepared for the news, as her husband. But then his suggestion that the marriage should be forgotten—did this mean that he wished to be free to make love to Cloete Sparshott? Perhaps marry her bigamously? Poor Dorothy, between her fears and her love, was on the very horns of a dilemma. Whom could she consult? Where could she seek aid? Her husband, the one man whom she ought to be able to rely upon, was the cause of her trouble; and Dorothy in her haste registered a rash vow, that when they were living together as actual man and wife, Stephen Brancepeth should be made to pay for the vexation he was causing her, and for his want of sympathy in her distress. But how was the gulf that lay between her and this happy possibility to be bridged over? That was the question that tormented her now night and day.

When the three days had expired, Dorothy found an excuse for sending Minton into Earlsport, and for making inquiries at the bank of Brancepeth Brothers whether Mr Stephen had returned. He was back, and Dorothy determined to waylay him on his return from Earlsport as he walked home across the Dunes that evening. She must pacify him in the meantime, and entreat him to have patience. Above all, he must be made to banish entirely from his mind the idea that their marriage could ever be set aside as a thing that had never been. And she must tell him of her interview with Cloete Sparshott; warn him that the girl knew of their relations; that it was now at her peril as well as his if there was any further flirtation between them. He would be angry, no doubt; but then Dorothy felt that she had a right to be angry too. After all, she had, she told herself, a double right of property in him as her husband, who owed all his good fortune to her and her money. Was it not his independent position—the position in which she had placed him—that had enabled him to make his own terms with the old banker? From what she knew of her father-in-law's character, she felt certain that if Stephen had come back as a humble suppliant for his charity and a suitor for pardon, matters would have been arranged very differently from what they had turned out.

As Dorothy prepared to sally forth to intercept her husband on his homeward walk, her eye fell upon Cloete Sparshott's cloak, which she had forgotten to send back. What an excellent disguise! was the idea that struck her. She might have to linger about the Dunes, goodness only knew how long, before Stephen made his appearance, and here was the very garment to mislead any one that might be about. The cloak was of a somewhat conspicuous plaid pattern, and was doubtless recognisable by many of the Earlsport people who might be taking an evening saunter across the Dunes. It was decidedly better that any gossip should find its mark in Cloete Sparshott, rather than in herself, Dorothy Colpoys. And then a brilliant idea struck her—an idea that almost took away her breath with a sense of coming triumph. Doubtless Brancepeth knew the cloak—knew it, perhaps, only too well; and in the dusk, with her face well concealed in the hood, might he not imagine that he was meeting Cloete, and let fall something to compromise himself before he discovered his error? What a satisfaction it would be if he should only blunder into committing himself in some way before he found out that he had met his wife! He would thus be entirely delivered into Dorothy's hands, and, with a well-affected show of indignation and jealousy, she would be able to induce him to do anything she wished. Her having had to borrow the cloak seemed to her a special providence, which might now solve all her difficulties and extricate her from her troubles. Yes, it was a happy inspiration to put it on.

Dorothy paced the skirts of the Dunes backwards and forwards, between the Dunes House and the Earlsport end, until both her strength and her patience were wellnigh getting exhausted, but Mr Brancepeth came not. Stephen Brancepeth had now no great love for the solitude of the house among the sandhills, and not unfrequently sought distraction by working at his desk long after the bank had closed. Work was the only diversion of his thoughts from what might have been, what was, and what would have to be; and to work he applied himself with an ability and a zeal that quite captivated his father's affection. The old banker, who had wrought unremittingly all his life, who never took a holiday unless he could subserve some business end at the same time, grew nervous at his son's application, feared that his health might break down, and sought excuses for sending him away here or there to give him a break in his work. But though Stephen willingly discharged such commissions, he was always glad to get back to his desk. The hereditary spirit of money-making, which had hitherto been latent in him, had now been aroused, and, as a passion, was the best counter-agent for that other passion which would have devoured him in idleness.

But neither love of woman nor love of money can keep a man from wanting his dinner; and Stephen, when he began to admit this law of nature, closed his desk and started for home. He had not gone far when he perceived Cloete Sparshott returning from a solitary walk upon the Dunes, advancing in the direction opposite to his own, but on the other side of the road. He had not sought her since the afternoon when, carried away by an uncontrollable burst of passion, he had taken her in his arms—a rashness which he had not since ceased to repent and be ashamed of. And now the encounter was awkward. Should he merely content himself with lifting his hat and pass by on the other side? No, that would be cowardly. After all, he was her friend, and resolved to be her friend. As soon as all misconception should be removed regarding his real position, they could meet, he told himself, and enjoy each other's society, without danger from censorious tongues, or the yet more deadly risk arising from intimate contact. Yes; when Dorothy assumed her position as mistress of the Dunes House, Cloete should be there often. He would be a father to her then, and would get her a good husband—a man of wealth and worth, with whom he might safely trust her. Animated by these paternal thoughts, Stephen Brancepeth crossed the road as Cloete approached, and met her full in the face.

Cloete, too, had recognised him at a distance, and there was a haughty triumphant look in her eyes which seldom found expression there, her head was held high, and her little feet smote the pavement with a firm tread. All her love could not prevent a feeling of contempt for this man who had sold himself—and for what? She drew a quick mental comparison between the rapidly maturing comeliness of Dorothy and her own fresh and youthful beauty, and the contrast elated her spirits and made her feel mistress of the situation. Yes, let him come, let him look with his own eyes, and then strike a balance of profit and loss on his choice. She knew his secret, and for the first time since the renewal of their acquaintance she felt herself the stronger.

"I hardly know what to say to you, Cloete," said Brancepeth, humbly enough, "for my conduct at our last meeting. I forgot myself—I was carried away beyond my power of resistance. You—you are not offended with me, Cloete?" in very penitential utterance.

"Offended with you, Mr Brancepeth! No, certainly not," said the girl, lightly. "It seems to be a way with some married men; at least, so your wife explained to me when we talked of the matter. If there was any blame, it was all mine; but then, you see, I did not know you were married. I know now, Mr Brancepeth."

"You know now!" gasped Stephen, taken quite aback by this announcement. Had Dorothy and she then met, and had Cloete betrayed him to his wife? "You know now! and oh, Cloete! can you bear it?"

"Bear it!" retorted the girl, with a laugh that rang much more of scorn than of anger. "What have I to bear? Why should I not bear it? It strikes me that I should rather ask that question of you."

Brancepeth was staggered by her words, and still more by her manner—a manner that he had never seen her show before; and he could scarcely collect himself sufficiently to frame an answer.

"Now that you know all," he said, slowly, "you will understand my position—my reserve—my—you will surely be able to sympathise with me, Cloete," he pleadingly added, in doleful tones.

"Sympathise with you!" she cried, in clear, ringing, scornful tones. "Why should you need sympathy? Because you have got a rich wife from the peerage, who is not so old—no, not so very old? You should have asked for my congratulations rather, Mr Brancepeth."

"Don't, Cloete," was all he could say, and that in very pitiful fashion.

"Well, whether you ask them or not, you have them—my warm congratulations and best wishes for the happiness of both you and the Honourable Mrs Brancepeth. And now, if you will kindly allow me to pass, I shall say good-bye."

"Stay, Cloete!" he cried; but the girl stepped aside and passed him.

"My name is Miss Sparshott, Mr Brancepeth, as I trust you will recollect for the future. Pray give my humble love to your wife," over her shoulder, as she hurried away.

"D—n it all!" groaned Stephen, as he stood looking after her while she quickly vanished round the corner of Earlsfield Square, her head held higher than usual, and with almost a defiant swing in her walk. "Who would have thought that Cloete had so much temper in her? So gentle and lovable, too, as she usually is. I never saw her so beautiful before as when her face just now was lighted up by rage and pride. Well, it is no use thinking about it now. My fate is cut and dry for me;" and Stephen, with downcast heart and lagging steps, went on his homeward way.

CHAPTER XLV.

THE TWO VOICES.

Although Harold Colpoys had professed to be quite himself again, and had very successfully assumed the outward appearance of being well and composed, he had not succeeded in deceiving the watchful scrutiny of Peters, who, having once got it into his head that his master was "up to" something, managed under one pretext or another to keep him under perpetual though unobtrusive observation. On the same afternoon as that on which Dorothy had gone out to look for Brancepeth, Harold had announced his intention of going out for a stroll in the Park, and Peters had at once volunteered to accompany him.

"My lord is very anxious about you, sir," the man said, apologetically, "and gave me strict orders that I was to go out with you in case you were taken ill again. Not that there is any chance of that, sir, for I never saw you pick up so quickly before, and you look fit for anything, Mr Harold."

"So I am, Peters," said Harold, with a hard laugh that grated upon the man's ears. "I never felt better or stronger in my life. But I suppose we must humour my father's whims. And as he is so anxious, I shall save him any uneasiness by not going out at all. I think I shall amuse myself in the laboratory for an hour or so, Peters."

To this Peters gladly assented, and Harold went into his work-room, where he busied himself for a while with various scientific recreations, employing the assistance of Peters to hand him whatever he required—to clean his glasses and retorts, and to manage his spirit-lamp.

"These smells have made me excessively

thirsty," he said, at length, looking up from his work and wiping his face with his hands. "I wish, Peters, you would go to the butler and get me some bottled beer. The fumes of that last acid have got into my throat."

Peters, certain that he would come in for a share of the refreshments, started on his mission with ready alacrity. When his back was turned, Harold opened a cabinet and took from it a small phial, which he uncorked and put by him on the table. Peters returned and poured out a glass of beer for his master, who drank about half of it and then set it down. "The beer doesn't seem so good as usual,—flat, I daresay. You may have this, Peters," and he filled his own glass from the bottle; "but first of all, put out that spirit-lamp and screw the cover on to it. I shall not want it again just now."

Peters turned to execute his orders, and while his back was towards him Harold quickly caught up the phial from the table and poured a portion of the contents into the glass.

"Here you are," he said, handing the glass to Peters; "tell me what you think of the beer. It certainly is flat compared with the last I had."

Peters slowly and critically drank off the beer. "It does seem queer, sir," he said, slowly; "it tastes like you don't know very well what. I daresay the bottle has been corked. And yet it must be woundy strong too, sir. Why, I think I a'most feel it in my head already."

Harold made no reply, but busied himself at his table, recorked the phial, and put it carefully back into the cabinet. Peters meanwhile began to put away the spirit-lamp, but a dazed look came over his face, and he almost reeled as he crossed the room to replace the lamp on its usual stand. Presently he lurched up against the table, and had to hold himself up with both hands.

"Gently, Peters," said Harold, quietly. "I begin to think you must have been right, and that the beer has gone to your head. You must have been drinking in the butler's pantry; all you had here could not have had so much effect upon you as this."

"Mr Harold," cried the man, wildly, "you hain't hocussed me, have you? There was something in that beer, I'll swear. Not a drop have I tasted to-day, except one glass at dinner-time. I'm going—I'm fainting! my lord must know——" and the faithful servant made an effort to stagger towards the bell.

"Be quiet, you fool!" said Harold, quickly intercepting him; "do you want to expose your drunkenness to the whole house, and get kicked out of it? Hocuss you, indeed! Go into the other room and lie on the couch there until you get sober;" and taking Peters by the shoulders, he impelled the reeling man into his sitting-room and pushed him on to the couch. Peters collapsed, muttering "Tell my lord," "up to some mischief," "hocussed," and in a few minutes fell asleep.

Harold stood over him for a little, watching his face and listening to his heavy breathing.

He took his hand and felt his pulse, and shook him by the shoulders, but Peters showed no signs of consciousness; and his hand, when Harold dropped it, fell helplessly down by the side of the couch.

"Now," said Harold, drawing a heavy breath, "he is disposed of for five or six hours at least. He will waken with a bad headache, but not otherwise worse, and I am free—yes, free to punish—to avenge myself. Yes, I shall punish her—her and him."

As he stood there looking down upon the sleeping man, all the severe mental restraint which he had imposed upon himself for days past was thrown aside, and the one idea which had kept possession of his mind, although so carefully concealed, surged up into his brain with all the force of a flood that has been dammed back, and having burst its barriers, sweeps everything else before it with ungovernable fury. His face changed to a dull clayey-red colour; his eyes seemed to contract, and to glisten with the malevolent brightness of a snake's; he shivered, and his hands twitched as if he were about to fall into convulsions.

"Yes," he muttered; "if she will not be mine, she will not be his, nor any one's. She has deceived me, ruined me. She has bewitched me—yes, she is a witch, a foul sorceress, for all her fair face. 'Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.' No, I shall not; she shall do no more harm—no more to me, to any one. Yes, I am right; she is a witch. I am doing God's work to slay her. 'Tis the Bible says so."

A look of fanaticism intensified but lightened up the fury on his countenance as he turned his eyes upward, as if seeking divine sanction for the deed he was meditating.

"I see it all!" he cried. "I am appointed to this work; I am the instrument of judgment to crush this lamia, this beautiful serpent that deceives men; I see her now as she is. Her beauty cannot hide the scales and the writhing folds from my eyes. *I* love her!—no, I hate her, hate her, hate her."

He ground his teeth and clenched his hands, while his whole body trembled with fury. No one who knew only the quiet and refined appearance of Harold Colpoys would have recognised him in that madman, whose wild eyes, clenched hands, and quivering frame denoted that he was under the power of some overmastering passion. But it was only for a minute that he stood thus. With a supreme effort he mastered himself, stretched his limbs, drew himself up to his full height, and endeavoured to compose his face to its usual quiet expression.

"Be cautious!" he muttered, as if he were a duality in which the wiser and more prudent member had to direct and guide the less capable one. "You may spoil all if you are not careful. Go into your dressing-room and bathe your head with *eau-de-Cologne*. It will firm and freshen you for the work."

He did so. He washed his face, bathed his temples, and carefully adjusted his toilet, gaining by the operation a false appearance of composure that must have deceived any one unacquainted with his mental peculiarities.

"Your revolver now," was the next direction; "it is all ready charged there in that drawer, and here is the key."

The weapon was taken out, carefully examined, and placed in his breast-pocket, over which he buttoned his coat.

"Now, then, we are ready. Your hat?—yes. *I* would lock that door and make all safe—not that there is much necessity for it. That drugged idiot there—that meddlesome madman—will sleep sound enough until you have done your work and returned. Yes, that is right—turn the key and put it in your pocket; you will require it to let you in."

"Take the private stair through the conservatory. Not that any one is likely to be about in the hall; but it is well to be safe. There! so far well, and now we are clear."

"Are there two of us?" said Harold, pausing and looking wildly about him, as he left the house and found himself alone in a dark walk of tall old laurels. "Who is this prompting and urging me on? Is it the devil? No, my object is right. It cannot be; it is my angel—my guardian angel—that is leading me to do a good work—yes, a good and noble work."

"Be calm, be calm!" suggested the monitor. "If you allow yourself to get excited you will lose all."

And Harold with a great effort forced his composure, and coolly concentrated his mind on the object he had in view, as he walked at a brisk pace through the Park in the direction of Earlsport. He called at the Museum and asked for Miss Sparshott. She was out, the servant informed him—had gone for a long walk on the Dunes. Did the girl know by which way she would return? Yes; she had gone by the highroad, and was coming home by the harbour—for she had said that she was going into a shop in the lower town to buy wools. If he went by the harbour road to the Dunes he would doubtless meet her.

And so Harold descended into the lower town, looking into the windows of every shop where wools were likely to be retailed, without discovering the object of his search, and found himself, as dusk was settling down, upon the open Dunes.

Brancepeth was not misled by the sight of Cloete Sparshott's cloak in the gathering dusk as he encountered Dorothy on his way home. He easily recognised his wife, and guessed where she had got the garment, divining also somewhat of the motive she had had for putting it on. He made up his mind for a *mauvais quart d'heure*, and felt not a little combative in consequence, although he greeted her affectionately, and kissed her with some warmth as they met.

"So you have come at last," were her first words. "Why have you avoided me?"

"Avoided you, Dorothy? What nonsense!

I had to go to town on business. But really I think that, while things are in this state of suspense, we should not see each other too often. Have you spoken to Lord Earlsfield yet?"

"No."

"No! And may I ask when you intend to do it, or if you mean to do it at all? I shall stand this silence no longer, Dorothy. You have broken all your promises about this matter, and now, for my own sake, I shall write to Lord Earlsfield at once and tell him all. As you have been informing other people of our marriage, I think it due to ourselves as well as to Lord Earlsfield that he should not hear of the matter at second-hand."

It was a bad card that Stephen had played, and Dorothy did not lose the chance of taking a trick.

"So you have been with Miss Sparshott again! You need not deny it; your words prove it," as Stephen attempted to interject something. "And this after all your promises to the contrary, and hers too. I can easily understand why you would like to regard our marriage as if it had never been —to blot it entirely out of your memory."

"It is like it," quoth Stephen, grimly, "after pressing you weekly, almost daily, for months past, to allow our marriage to be announced to the world!"

"It is all very well to say so," pursued Dorothy; "but you know well what weighty reasons exist for my waiting until the moment is ripe for telling Earlsfield. You know all my troubles and my difficulties, and you take advantage of them—to—to persecute me thus."

"Persecute you, Dora! How have I persecuted you? It has been my forbearance—my culpable forbearance I should say—that has allowed you to keep both yourself and me so long in this false and painful position."

"But that was no reason why you should engage in an intrigue with that girl."

"Intrigue! Girl! I will not pretend not to know what you mean. But I positively deny that I have been guilty of any intrigue with Miss Sparshott. I have seen her, I have spoken to her with all the warmth that could scarcely help springing from our old friendship. I will even admit, as my honour demands, that I may have been carried away for a moment by the force of old associations. But I have engaged in no intrigue, and I have never for an instant been disloyal to you either in thought or word. But if I had, Dora, don't you think that the blame should rather rest with you than me? Come to my home—to your home—and be my wife in the eyes of all the world. Then all grounds or pretexts for jealousy will disappear at once."

"Oh, Stephen, would that it could be so!" cried Dorothy, softened, as she placed her hand upon his arm, and looked up through the gloom into his face. "But I have sad forebodings that something will come between us."

"Nothing shall," said Stephen, kissing her tenderly. "As for Cloete Sparshott, you may make your mind easy," he added, with some feeling of ill-concealed bitterness. "I met her to-night as I was leaving the bank, and she cut me with the most lofty contempt and scorn,—the result of her knowing that I was married."

"Thank God!" said Dorothy, fervently.

"Umph! So you need give yourself no further worry on that score," returned Stephen, drily; "and as for Lord Earlsfield, it is not now a matter of the first consequence whether he is pleased or angry. We can do very well without your money, and if he chooses to claim it, you will give it up without any bother. Now, Dora, let us put an end to this. Let me write to Lord Earlsfield, or send my father as ambassador. He is an excellent man of business, and so proud of his daughter-in-law that he will fight his best for us."

"I don't know," said Dorothy. "I am

so afraid. I have felt for some time past that something is going to happen to me."

"Something is going to happen to you. You are going to leave the Court without delay, and to come to your own house and your own husband. Surely you can never doubt that that is the course which is best for both of us. All your jealous misgivings will be removed then, and we shall settle down quietly to live our future life. Let us solve the difficulty at once, Dora. Come home with me this night, just now, to the Dunes House, and we shall both write to Lord Earlsfield and tell him all,—and we shall not trouble ourselves, however he may take it. If there is disappointment, we shall bear it better both together."

Brancepeth spoke warmly, and took Dorothy in his arms as he pressed the suggestion upon her. But hers was a nature that shrank from decided action when suddenly called upon to face it. She could plan, project, and plot, but when she had to carry out her schemes she generally shrank from executing them. This was especially the case when a proposal was suddenly made to her: she trembled at the temptation Brancepeth held out to her, and was filled with fear at the daring step which it involved.

"I should so much like," she hesitated; "it would be such a relief not to have to face Earlsfield when he is told,—to be away from the Court, out of hearing of all the scoldings and reproaches. But, but——"

"Never mind 'buts,'" said Brancepeth; "there must be many 'buts,' however the business is managed. Still, this is the best and most summary way of solving the difficulty. Lord Earlsfield shall know all by to-morrow morning, and we can patiently wait the result together. Come with me now, Dora."

But Dorothy's indecision increased rather than lessened as the open rebelliousness of such a course, the overt defiance of her elder brother's authority, rose before her. "No, no, not at once, Stephen, not at once. I must have time, I must think. I could not go with you to-night, though it would be so delightful. But I think I shall come. We shall do as you say. Give me until to-morrow evening to think it over and make my arrangements, and I shall come to you. And you will love me, Stephen? You will not give me cause to fear that your love is straying from me?"

"Never, my darling," said Stephen, kissing her fondly; "it shall be the study of my life to secure your happiness. Whatever comes, we shall be happy in ourselves, and let the world slide."

"To-morrow night," said Dorothy, as he kissed away her tears for adieu. "I am fearful, but oh, so happy!—so happy, that something is sure to occur to spoil all."

"Keep up your heart, my love," said Brancepeth; "think how near you are to the end of your troubles. By to-morrow night you will feel that all has been got over."

As they parted, and Stephen walked slowly through the Dunes in the direction of his house, it was with a lighter heart than he had felt for some time back. To-morrow night would end all the suspense, all the worry, that he had been going through since he had returned to Earlsport. It was a happy inspiration this to take Dorothy home at once, and then let Earlscourt take what course it might think fit. He would send his father as ambassador to my lord. If the matter could be arranged on a friendly footing, so much the better. If Dorothy could retain her money, better still; but they could do well without it, in any event. He rather feared the talk of the town. It would supply Earlsport with full nine days' gossip; but that was inevitable sooner or later. And Cloete Sparshott? He was angry with her. In her jealous wrath she had spoken scornfully of Dorothy, and had treated Brancepeth himself with something like contempt. That was well, too—well that there should be a coldness, even a quarrel, between them. It would save all cause of misunderstanding with Dorothy. And Cloete, too, should have her punishment. She should witness the idyllic domestic happiness that reigned at the Dunes House, and seeing Brancepeth's devotion as a husband, should learn to realise how much she had lost. But he would be kind to the girl all the same, he told himself, as he began to reflect whether the blame, if any, was not more his than hers. He would still help her father in his difficulties; and—yes, he would make Dorothy ask Cloete to the Dunes House, and between them they would look out for a suitable husband for her.

Full of these benevolent thoughts, Brancepeth was turning in at his gate when the faint sound of a shot came across the Dunes, raising dull echoes among the hollows of the dark sandhills. He paused and listened.

"Some of these fools of volunteers firing off their rifles on their way home from the range, I suppose. They will shoot somebody one of these days. Yet it did not sound like a rifle-shot either."

And dismissing the subject, he went in to dine and dream of the new life upon which he was about to enter, when he should bring home Dorothy for good on the following evening.

CHAPTER XLVI.

DOROTHY.

Next morning Dorothy did not appear at breakfast, and Mrs Firebrace sent for Minton, her maid; but that personage simply returned for answer that her mistress was not coming down. Minton knew that her mistress had gone to meet Brancepeth, and had sat up all night for her; and now, when she had not appeared even with morning, the woman thought it best to conceal her absence and hold her tongue, although she was beginning to feel very anxious. She would wait until breakfast was over, and if there was no sign of Dorothy, she would slip off to the Dunes House and learn what had occurred.

Meanwhile up-stairs Harold had spent the most of the night sitting by Peters's couch, waiting for his awakening. A great feeling of calm had fallen over the young man—a calm tempered with a deep sense of melancholy. He had fulfilled his mission. Now that the work was done he could feel sorry that he had had to do it, but no idea of remorse entered his mind. He had done an act of justice; heaven had directed him to it; he must not dispute the message that was put into his heart. "I suppose these fools, who know nothing, would call it murder," he muttered to himself. "But who is there to know that I did it? I must keep perfectly calm and quiet—all depends upon that." So he sat by Peters's side, until late next morning the man began to toss about, stretch himself, and otherwise show signs of returning consciousness. At length he opened his eyes, raised himself on his elbow, and looked about him with a dazed, vacant stare, taking in slowly, and bit by bit, the circumstances of the situation.

"So, Peters," said Harold, "you are awake at last. I couldn't think what had come over you. What had you taken? You collapsed all at once. It could not have been the beer, for I had some of it as well as you."

"Mr Harold," said Peters, "I—I don't know; it seems to me as if I had forgotten everything. I was with you in the study, and I drank some beer—and after that I remember nothing more."

"There is nothing more to remember," said Harold, carelessly. "I put you on to the couch, and have watched you ever since. If you had not come round speedily I should have sent for a doctor."

"Mr Harold," said the man, rising and looking searchingly into his master's face, "you didn't try any tricks with your chemicals, did you? You didn't hocuss me, you know?"

"Hocuss you, you fool!" said Harold, angrily, but not meeting the man's firm eye. "Why on earth should I hocuss you, as you call it? I have only been too anxious about you: never went to bed myself."

"It is queer," said Peters, reflectively, looking all round about him. "I was never taken that way before."

"And I hope you won't be again," retorted Harold. "Now, go and fetch me breakfast, and get some to yourself; and take a little brandy-and-water. Your senses seem to want wakening up."

"I *was* hocussed," muttered Peters to himself, as he left the room with rather unsteady steps. "And he has been outside. Them boots show mud that he could not have got in his rooms. I wonder what he has been up to? But if I hear nothing I'll say nothing, for least said is soonest mended."

Down-stairs breakfast was drawing to a close dully enough, when Mrs Firebrace suddenly uttered a little exclamation which aroused Lord Earlsfield from his reverie, and made him demand irritably what was the matter.

"Some one on horseback," she answered,

"galloping up. I wonder what is the matter? It is—I think—yes, it is Mr Horseley."

"Mr Horseley!" said my lord, going to the window; "what business can Mr Horseley have with me?" But before he could say anything further, his speculations were cut short by a loud ring at the door-bell. Lord Earlsfield went out into the hall, a sense of uneasiness, a feeling that something unusual had happened, quickening his movements. He found Squire Ned standing on the door-step with his horse's bridle in his hand.

"My lord, I have bad news for you," said Ned, in abrupt but kindly tones. "I regret that it should have fallen to me to be the bearer. Your sister, Miss Dorothy Colpoys——"

What! had Dorothy too eloped? was the first idea that flashed across Lord Earlsfield's mind. He was surely getting elopement on the brain. He had always feared Dorothy would make a fool of herself in this fashion.

"What, is *she* gone?" he cried.

"Yes, my lord, I fear she is gone," said Ned, bowing his head, but unable to conceal a look of surprise at Lord Earlsfield's remark.

"Damn her!" cried Lord Earlsfield, losing all control; "then let her go. But not one sixpence of her aunt's money shall she have—not one sixpence! Who is the fellow?"

"I am afraid there is a mistake, my lord," said Ned, sadly. "Miss Colpoys will never require money again. Something has happened to her—something very serious. In fact, she is dead, my lord."

"Dead!" ejaculated Lord Earlsfield, in an angry tone. "How could she be dead? Where is she? Speak out what you mean, Mr Horseley."

"Miss Colpoys has met her death, my lord," said Ned, with more patience than he could have been expected to show. "By accident, I do trust; but that remains to be seen. Her body is lying in a bush of grass outside the Park wicket on the verge of the Dunes. I came upon it in my morning ride. I called your keeper, and left him in charge while I came to tell you, and now I must gallop off for the police and the coroner;" and next minute Ned was in the saddle, and dashing down the avenue at breakneck speed.

Dorothy dead! The police and the coroner! Another fresh calamity to be grappled with. She must have met with an accident.

Dead! Poor Dorothy! Lord Earlsfield's mind went back with a flash of tender recollection to the young girl who had been the brightest and most loving of them all in days when he himself was young and unfossilised, and before Lady Pye's money had made her a care upon his mind. Poor Dorothy! But time could not be lost. Something must be done.

Turning to the servants who were already crowding, terror-stricken, about the hall, he ordered the men to follow him through the Park, and with hasty steps took the road to the wicket opening out to the Dunes.

Thereby, in a little hollow, half hidden by a bush of gorse, lay the body of Dorothy Colpoys, still wearing the too conspicuous macintosh. A policeman had already arrived, and was kneeling by the body before Lord Earlsfield and his party came up.

"Is she dead?" was all the brother could say; but the stiffened body and set rigid face, with an expression of pained contortion stamped on it, made the question superfluous. "Dead! Dorothy dead!" was all that he could utter.

"Quite dead, my lord," answered the policeman; "she has been dead for a good many hours, in my opinion. Shot through the heart, I think, my lord."

"Shot!" exclaimed Lord Earlsfield. "Good God! it must have been murder."

"Looks uncommon like it, my lord," answered the man. "Now you chaps keep back, and don't disturb the ground until we have examined it. My lord may come up."

Lord Earlsfield knelt down by the body, and the policeman pointed out the fatal wound, and the sand and bushes stained by the life-blood. It seemed like a dream, of which he could hardly realise the reality. Dorothy dead! murdered! Who could have done it?

"What could have been the object," he asked the policeman—"robbery?"

"Don't think so, my lord,—no signs of that; but we shall see when the inspector and the coroner comes,—and here they are," as the sound of a hurried tramp of horses' feet came along the Earlsport road, and presently the superintendent of police and the coroner, led by Ned Horseley, appeared on the scene.

With silent salutations to Lord Earlsfield, the two functionaries prepared to examine the body and its surroundings, conversing together in low tones, while they took notes of their observations, the little crowd around looking on with painful attention. After a whispered colloquy with the superintendent the coroner spoke.

"You will doubtless wish the body to be taken to the Court, my lord. There will, of course, have to be an inquest as soon as the superintendent has made his investigations. And your lordship may depend on everything being done to bring this crime to light."

"You believe it to be murder then?" said Lord Earlsfield.

"I ought not to say so, my lord, as I shall have to decide judicially whether or not it has been so."

"I have no hesitation," said the superintendent, "in declaring that murder has been committed. No other explanation is possible."

"You will do your best to probe this matter to the bottom," said his lordship. "Spare no expense; I will give a thousand pounds—more, if necessary—to have justice done."

"All shall be done, my lord, that we can do," said the superintendent. "Your lordship knows of no enemy Miss Colpoys had, or of any circumstance that would give us a clue?"

"I know of no enemy,—I can conceive of no motive."

"Well, we shall do what we can in our own way, and I shall call on your lordship later and trouble you for any information that I may think likely to be of assistance."

"I shall be at your service, sir," said Lord Earlsfield, bowing, and signing to his men to lift the body and place it upon a stretcher that had been hurriedly procured.

Slowly the sad procession moved through the Park along the walk that Dorothy had so often trodden in her stolen meetings with her husband. Lord Earlsfield walked by the head—his mind perplexed and bewildered by the mystery, and not a little touched with grief. He had come into Lady Pye's fortune, but what good was it to him now with all his plans ruined? And what might not come out of this? There might be some scandal behind the crime. And the police and the coroner and the newspapers! Who knew what trouble might not be in store for him, he impatiently thought.

Harold was standing dreamily looking out of his window as the mournful party came from the laurel bushes. As he saw the stretcher and its burden he gave a great cry and trembled all over.

"Not here! not here!" he shrieked to Peters, who was instantly by his side. "Tell them they must not bring her here! Take her home—home to the Museum. Tell them, I say, quick!" he cried, wildly.

"Come now, Mr Harold," said Peters, "don't agitate yourself. It is your poor aunt, Miss Dorothy, who has been found dead on the Dunes—shot, they say. I was just going to break the news to you."

"Liar!" exclaimed Harold, throwing himself furiously upon Peters. "It's a lie—a lie, I say. It is not my aunt; it is Cloete Sparshott. I know, I shot her. They shall not bring her here. I won't have it. Let me go, I tell you."

Peters struggled with the young man, whose suppressed mania had now burst forth in all the fury of dangerous madness. He endeavoured to force him into the inner room; but Harold, with all the strength of delirium, seized him by the throat, and dashing his head against the wall, hurled him into a corner of the room, where he lay stunned and motionless.

Rushing into the corridor, Harold quickly dashed down the staircase and encountered the bearers as they were entering. "Why do you bring her here?" he shouted, hoarsely, as he waved them back. "This is no place for her. Take her home — home, I say, quickly."

Lord Earlsfield, who had been holding the head of the body, handed it in alarm to the person who was next him, and would have gone to his son, but by the change the handkerchief which had been thrown over Dorothy's face was displaced, and Harold's frantic gaze became fixed upon the dead face of his aunt.

"The cloak!" he shrieked, and throwing up his arms, fell upon the floor in convulsions.

"The shock has been too much for him," said his father; "carry him up-stairs to his own room. Where can Peters be? He ought not to have allowed him to come down. And some of you saddle a horse and ride quickly for a doctor."

They carried Harold up to his room and laid him on a couch, and to their surprise found Peters lying insensible in a corner. He was raised up, and his face bathed with water, and some brandy poured down his throat, when he began slowly to come to himself, and to look wildly round him. As his eyes fell upon Harold, who was lying motionless, except for an occasional convulsive twitch of his limbs, Peters roused himself by a great effort, and ordered them all out of the room.

"I know what to do here," he said, paying no heed to requests for an explanation; "tell my lord that I shall attend to Mr Harold, and come and see him when I can leave him. And now clear out of this, one and all of you."

The day was one of sad trials to Lord Earlsfield. One calamity after another seemed to be contending together which should first assail him. Scarcely had he finished giving the necessary directions about the body, and preparations for the inquest, when Mr Mold, of Fossebraye & Mold, was announced; and when Lord Earlsfield sharply refused to be troubled with him at such a juncture, Mr Mold sent in a pencil note intimating that he had called with important information relating to Miss Colpoys. When he was at length admitted, Mr Mold had still another shock to administer to his lordship. He had to inform him of a fact of which he, Mr Mold, presumed his lordship still remained in ignorance—if he was wrong, then he humbly apologised for intruding upon his lordship's grief; but was Lord Earlsfield aware that the Honourable Miss Colpoys had been privately married to Mr Stephen Brancepeth?

"What do you say?" asked Lord Earlsfield, fixing a stony stare upon the lawyer, who rolled his eyes until they became as visionless as those of a statue.

"Married, I assure you, my lord. Privately married in France more than a year ago. The papers are deposited in our office with my partner, who is Mr Stephen Brancepeth's adviser. He is from home, and I have taken the responsibility upon myself of communicating with your lordship in the interests of justice and the honour of your lordship's family."

"Married!" cried Lord Earlsfield, starting to his feet. "Then that—that explains much. Privately married, and his name has been connected with some girl in Earlsport. Mr Mold, that man is the murderer! Where is he?"

"I believe Mr Brancepeth has gone out to sea to fish this morning. I should not be surprised though he never returned of his own free will."

"Mr Mold, I am much obliged to you for your information. We must act at once. Will you at once see the police, and tell them what you have told me, and get them to take steps to have this man instantly apprehended?"

But Mr Mold had objections to acting personally in the matter. His firm were Mr Brancepeth's lawyers, and though sympathy for his lordship had impelled him to disclose what he knew, it would not be proper that he should in any way appear in the matter. The best course Lord Earlsfield could adopt would be to write at once to the police authorities and inform them of what he had heard — without mentioning the source of his information—and suggest that a watch should be kept upon Mr Brancepeth until his innocence was made out.

Mr Mold took his departure, and Lord Earlsfield did as he had recommended. This new development had come opportunely to rouse him from the gloomy depression into which his sister's mysterious death had at first cast him. Here was a clear case for meting out punishment of the most condign character, and he would see that the law was carried out in its most rigorous penalties. The vile insolence of this man,—the son of a citizen of Earlsport,—to marry his, Lord Earlsfield's sister, and for her money—that money which justly belonged to him, and which he had so jealously safeguarded, and then to murder her! Doubtless because he saw that he could not get her fortune into his own hands. It was all quite evident to Lord Earlsfield, and he would at once set about and vindicate his sister's memory, by showing the unprincipled intrigue into which she had been inveigled, and the penalty she had paid for her folly. Brancepeth, of course, must be hanged. No judge or jury would ever let off such a villain, and Dorothy's money would of course be saved. He must see his lawyers at once—not Fossebraye, who had betrayed him by accepting Brancepeth's secret, and concealing it from him. No; he would telegraph at once to his London solicitor to come down by the first train.

As he rang for a servant to take the telegram to Earlsport, he bethought himself to inquire whether Harold had recovered from his shock, and ordered Peters to be sent to him. "It was very inconsiderate of Peters to allow him to get down-stairs at that moment," he muttered, angrily; "he knows how excitable he is, and what harm such a spectacle might do him."

Peters appeared, his face cut and swollen, and with an air of depression that checked the rebuke Lord Earlsfield was prepared to administer to him for his negligence.

"It is a bad business this, my lord, a terrible business," said he, shaking his head; "he has been the death of Miss Dorothy."

"The death of Miss Dorothy! What do you mean? Miss Dorothy's death is all but explained, and her murderer probably apprehended by this time."

"He done it, my lord," said Peters, sadly. "I knew he had some mischief on his mind all along. He hocussed me last night and slipped out of doors, and this morning there is one barrel of his revolver empty. You will find the missing bullet in Miss Dorothy, my lord."

"You must be mad, man, or have been drinking," said my lord, fixing a stern look of amazement upon Peters's face. "You are not speaking of Mr Harold?"

"He did it, my lord. He stole out last night after he hocussed me, and shot her."

"Shot his aunt! Why, he was deeply attached to her,—devotedly attached to her. You are mad, Peters."

"It was all that damned cloak that did it," groaned the man; "he took her for Miss

Sparshott. He has hated her for some time. He as good as confessed all this morning, my lord."

Lord Earlsfield stood speechless, looking fixedly at Peters for some minutes, and then fell a lifeless mass upon the floor. The doctor, who had been sent for, had just then arrived, and kneeling down beside him, endeavoured to arouse him to consciousness. Stimulants and restoratives were vigorously applied, and Lord Earlsfield at last opened his eyes and gazed listlessly round about him. His lips were seen to move in a fruitless attempt to give expression to some words, but nothing articulate came. With his left hand he endeavoured to imitate the act of writing, and to scrawl some letters on a piece of paper which was held to his hand. With painful effort he traced some shaky characters, which the doctor handed to Mrs Firebrace.

"It seems," she said, as she studied the scrawl through her spectacles, "something like 'George' and 'Mary.' He cannot wish

George Colpoys and his wife brought here! The shock must have destroyed his reason."

In reply Lord Earlsfield glared angrily at her from under his shaggy eyebrows.

"Do you wish, my lord, to have the Honourable Mr Colpoys and his wife telegraphed for immediately?" said the doctor, and a feeble inclination of the head gave an affirmative response.

"It is apoplexy, and I doubt the result may be serious," whispered the doctor to Mrs Firebrace; "you had better telegraph immediately."

Mrs Firebrace left the room to do so with a glance at her prostrate brother that had quite as much of scorn as sympathy in its composition.

CHAPTER XLVII.

TWO YEARS AFTER.

We drop the curtain over the tragedy of death, disaster, and disgrace that has fallen upon Earlscourt, and only raise it again to afford a less melancholy glimpse of some personages who have lived and moved in the foregoing pages.

It is late in a summer evening, and a fresh breeze from the German Ocean comes sweeping over the Dunes, bringing its usual pleasant salty coolness into the old summer-house, where certain love-passages between George Colpoys and Mary Donne are recorded as having taken place, and round which the pigeons fluttered as in days of yore. Thither had strolled Lord Earlsfield and the member for the borough of Earlsport to smoke their after-dinner cigars, and discuss events that had taken place since their last meeting.

“And so you topped the pole by a thundering majority,” Lord Earlsfield was saying. “A good three hundred more than the highest vote I ever had. Well, I am glad the Solicitor-General was beaten. The brute made himself very unpleasant at his first election, when he came here at the time I went to the Canals and Docks Department,—growled that we did not support him; but how could I, when we were all in such a mess at the time?”

“Well, I believe I have you to thank for it,” said the member. “If the Earlscourt influence had been thrown on the other side, I would not have had much to show.”

“No, perhaps not,” mused Lord Earlsfield; “but it was Mary’s idea more than mine. We were at Pisa when your address came out, and Mary said, ‘You must tell them you cannot oppose Mr Brancepeth as a candidate connected with the family, and that while you remain neutral your sympathies are with him.' So I wrote Fossebraye, and he did the rest,—put the screw, I fancy, pretty tightly upon our people."

"Well, I wouldn't swear he didn't," laughed Brancepeth. "The 'Mercury' had a good deal to say about undue influence, and they even threatened a petition. Sometimes I almost wished they had brought up one, for I have not a keen taste for legislation."

"Beastliest nuisance imaginable," put in the member of the Upper House. "Why fellows are fools enough to do it is what I could never understand. Poor Earlsfield had the idea that a Colpoys ought to sit for the borough; and so, as the victim most ready to hand, I was sacrificed."

"Well, in my case," returned Brancepeth, "it was more to please my father than my own ambition that I stood at all. He had quite set his heart upon seeing me in Parliament, and gave me no peace until I consented to come forward. He is ageing now and failing a good deal, and one must humour him."

"Sharp enough at business yet, I bet," put in Lord Earlsfield. "Gad! he was the tightest hand I ever tried with a bill in my hard-up days. And yet I am the last man in the world who ought to say that, when I recollect how generously both you and he behaved about poor Dora's money."

"Poor Dora!" said Brancepeth, with a sigh, as a shade of sadness came over his face. "Of course we could have done nothing else. The money was not ours, and we had not a shade of claim to it either in law or in justice."

"I don't know," said George. "At all events you might have bothered and given us trouble about it, which would have embittered Earlsfield's last days. It quite revived him for a time when he heard that you withdrew all claim to Dorothy's fortune. The world kept hold of him to the last, and the very day before he had his last stroke, he was planning the purchase of that outlying corner of the Elsedale property with it, and entailing it on the title."

"You disposed of it in a more generous manner."

"Well, yes, I could not think of taking the money. Mary said always it had been the cause of Dora's death, and would bring no luck to us or our children. And there was Jim always on the rocks, and with a growing family too; so it was just the thing to set him on his legs. So we made over the money to him, and settled him in your old quarters, the Dunes House, and put him in charge of the estates while we were abroad."

"And you couldn't have a better manager than Colonel Colpoys. He'll double your rental if he goes on as he has begun."

"I believe the credit is due more to Mrs Jim than to him. She rides him with a curb now, I can tell you. Since they got the money she has put such a screw upon him that he daren't for his soul back a horse even for a fiver; and Mrs Jim would as soon allow him to handle a dynamite bomb as a card. A wonderful woman she is. Never knew one who could make up so good a book upon the Derby."

"She comes out strong from a theological point of view," laughed Brancepeth; "she has been scenting unsound doctrine in all the pulpits in Earlsport. She assailed my father-in-law, Dr Sparshott, for habitual non-attendance at church, and was, I am shocked to say, repelled with very violent if not profane language."

"Just like the old chap! How is he getting along?"

"Well, he is in very hot water just now. A deputation of the trustees came to him and proposed that he should retire upon half-salary. The Doctor was sorting fossils at the time, and I am told that they were speedily converted into missiles, and that the deputation had to run for it all the way down the staircase, the stones flying about their heads."

"Good old chap!" murmured George, softly. "I have been peppered by the beggars myself upon the hustings."

"And so I suppose you will settle down here for good?" asked Brancepeth.

"Well, I suppose we shall have to go to town for the season. I must show my wife as Lady Earlsfield, and Mary is fussing about my attending the House. An awful bore, but I suppose she will have her way. It is all so new to you yet, that I don't suppose you realise the small modicum of personal freedom that is allowed to married men in the present age. By the way, your marriage came off much more quickly than we had expected. Mr Fossebraye wrote to Mary when we were in Italy that the lady was as obdurate as nails, and that you seemed to be on the verge of suicide."

"Not quite so bad as that," laughed Brancepeth, "but I admit there were difficulties. I think my father more than myself deserves credit for arranging matters. He went to Cloete and talked to her. What arguments he used I never inquired, but the result was that I was allowed to plead my own cause, and the rest came naturally enough."

"Of course it would," said George; "and I am glad of it."

"It is very kind of you, Lord Earlsfield, to say so," said Brancepeth, gratefully; "many men would have been less tolerant in your position."

"No, no," said my lord; "no one should be married to dead clay. Poor Dora! If she had lived, I am sure you would have made her happy. And I don't wonder that you should seek to blot out the memory of that terrible time. When I returned to Earlscourt the other day the whole thing came back to me as fresh as ever, though it is now two years ago. Harold dying a raving maniac;

poor Earlsfield sinking every day nearer the grave, clinging to Mary like a child, and yet querulously blaming her for the ruin of all his plans, and as the cause of everything that had occurred; grasping at everything until the last breath, and only regretting that he had not been able to do everything as he had wished. And then the annoyance of the newspapers, with their 'Earlscourt Tragedy'; the police hunting after Harold until he was actually dead. It all came back upon me with full force, and had I not heard the laughing of Mary and the child as they played on the lawn, I felt as if I could have fled from the house as a place accursed. But one gets over these feelings," his lordship concluded, philosophically, as he relit his cigar, which had gone out while he was talking.

"Lucky it is so," said Brancepeth, "and here come the ladies;" and down the laurel path came two fair dames, of the brightest and stateliest type of English womanhood. We know them already, and the pigeons, too, know Lady Earlsfield as well as they did Mary Donne; for late as it is, they rouse up from their perches, and one or two of the least sleepily inclined dart down on the path before her. We know Cloete Sparshott too; for though we recognise in her a dignity and repose lightened by the indescribable radiance of newly made wifehood, she is beauteous as the maiden we have met with in her darker days. There is a soft, contented melody in her voice, breathing of assured repose, as she says to her husband, "Come, Stephen, it is time we walked back to Earlsport. We must not keep Mr Brancepeth up, and you know he will not go to bed until I return."

THE END.

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